

THE BRONZE VENUS . . .

by EDEN PHILLPOTTS



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THE BRONZE VENUS

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BY

EDEN PHILLPOTTS

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I

A SHOCK FOR MRS. FAIRBROTHER

THE library at Orchard Dene, Tunbridge Wells, was a handsome apartment—indeed more than a library, for Mrs. Fairbrother loved it as well as her husband did and spent much of her leisure there. Notable book-shelves adorned the walls. They were Sheraton and of great distinction. Between them hung a series of large etchings: the ruins of our Norman Castles. French windows opened upon the garden, and though the electric light now blazed from silver sconces, a blue summer dusk still hung over the grounds and a fountain not far distant plashed lazily, as though wearying of its labours.

The marble mantelpiece was a copy of that famous work by Stevens—the rare artist too little recognised and revered. A few flowering plants in massive bronze tubs broke the lines of the room, and one peculiar object, built into the wall upon the right-hand side of the mantelpiece, must have arrested any observant eye. It was

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a small safe inefficiently disguised. Rich fabrics hung about the room ; a coat-of-arms appeared blazoned above the central book-shelf ; the chairs were numerous and comfortable ; many objects of ancient art were scattered through the apartment, and others collected together under the glass face of a large silver-table. The decorations were old fashioned to modern taste, yet they lacked not an air of repose rarely to be found where chambers are designed and adorned in the latest fashion.

But it was a remarkable room to have been created by a man who had begun life as a navvy, and it argued enthusiasms and emotions rarely to be found in that valuable class of the community.

Josiah Fairbrother was a self-made man who knew what to do with his money—a *rara avis*. By some streak of heredity, not necessary to investigate, he had been born with a sense of beauty, and when his other more practical endowments of mind raised him from the railway and road-making, he developed æsthetic tastes and employed a gigantic fortune in the manner that his bent inclined.

Now his wife and two daughters were about to drink their coffee in the library, and Mrs. Fairbrother, a large and handsome woman of sixty, expressed pleasure at the companionship

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of the girls. For they had been spending some weeks from home with acquaintance.

They returned full of secrets and the time for confession had come. Felicity Fairbrother was a brunette of twenty-five—sparkling, audacious and beautiful. Her friends said that she was illusive, her enemies—she had but few—declared her devious. She was exceedingly clever, adored her parents and appreciated art, after a fashion, but not as her father did. Vera, the elder by a year, was fair, flaxen and Saxon. She, too, could claim beauty, but she had not been called Vera for nothing. A morbid delicacy on the subject of truth caused her to be difficult at times ; but her good heart, good temper and wonderful blue eyes made the baser sort forgive her veracity, while her parents and all people worthy of respect of course applauded it.

“How nice to have you settled at home once more !” said Mrs. Fairbrother. “But we can’t spare you both together again. Father missed you, Vera ; you, too, Felicity.”

“It was only six weeks, mamma,” replied the younger daughter. “A month at the Mainwarings’ and a fortnight with the Fosters.”

“And such a lovely time, wasn’t it, Felicity ? ”

“Heavenly ! ” answered her sister.

At this moment entered the butler with coffee. He was a clean-shaven man of an

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anxious face and dog-like eyes. He lived for the family.

"There's two London gentlemen coming down to see the Bronze to-night," he said, and Mrs. Fairbrother showed impatience.

"No peace, even after dinner. Sometimes I could almost regret the Bronze, Nupkins."

Nupkins bowed.

"So could I, madam. It's more trouble than all the castles put together," he answered.

"Papa loves it better than all the castles put together," declared Felicity.

"He do, Miss," admitted Nupkins. "A proper graven image he makes of her. She'll be stole presently, and then where are we? I tremble for the little 'ussy."

Vera reproved him.

"You're such a pessimist, Nupkins. People are not always robbing other people's houses."

He shook his head.

"There's a lot live for it. You see proper shameful things on the films; and all true to nature I'm afraid, Miss."

Nupkins withdrew. He had been speaking of a very famous Greek bronze, which by happy chance, and at enormous cost, now belonged to the master of Orchard Dene. But this magnificent curio, known to the world as "The Venus of Naxos," brought cares and anxieties with it.

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Mr. Fairbrother was sensitive concerning his obligations to the community and he held that the accident of possession by no means ended responsibility, either in the matter of wealth or treasure. Everybody interested knew where the Venus of Naxos could be seen, and permission to view this unique and superb specimen of archaic art was denied to no respectable person. Similarly his other hobbies—his Norman castles—were open to view, and this great and good man liked to inspect the visitors' books from time to time and ascertain who had appreciated the privilege he accorded to his fellow creatures.

"I wish father would lend the Venus of Naxos to the British Museum and have done with it," murmured Mrs. Fairbrother.

"Papa hates the British Museum—you know why," said Vera, and her mother sighed.

"I forgot—poor father—of course."

"Our Venus comforts him," declared Felicity. "He loves her fearfully—for herself, and because she's so like me. People noticed I had an archaic smile, in London."

"Very rude of them," replied her mother.

"They liked it—especially——" She stopped and Vera spoke.

"I think we ought to tell mamma now, Felicity."

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"Do then—it's time certainly."

"We've got something tremendous to announce, dear mamma," began Vera.

"Hear me first, however," said her parent. "I'm not pleased with either of you to-night. You've both painted, and you know how your father dislikes it."

"This doesn't amount to painting, dear mamma," replied Felicity. "It's mere sketching—nothing at all. You should have seen some of the women at the Covent Garden fancy dress ball—the charity ball for indigent somebodies—I forget the exact cause."

"You sent no particulars of that."

"We kept them for to-night," explained Vera.

"I went as a baked potato," said Felicity, and her mother expressed displeasure.

"It sounds horrid, but it looked lovely. And Vera was Clytie rising out of a sunflower. Only there was too much sunflower and not enough Clytie. Vera's such a prude."

"In my young days," answered Mrs. Fairbrother, "girls chose 'Little Red Riding-hood,' or a 'Fairy Queen' and pretty things like that."

Vera was interested.

"Did you ever go to a fancy dress ball, mamma?" she asked.

"Good gracious, no! You forget our position, child. The daughters of the people didn't go

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to fancy dress balls in those days. And when—when things changed it was too late.”

“It’s never too late—especially for a fancy dress ball,” explained Vera. “People hundreds of years older than you were there—dancing too.”

“Fancy dress gives everybody a chance, mamma ; and they take it. Talk about painting ! Some of the poor old things were simply frescoed ; and when they laughed, it was like Solomon’s temple—all gold and precious workmanship.”

“Felicity,” said her mother. “You are vulgar, my child, and will live to know that nobody can escape the dentist.”

“But not a loud dentist—not a showy, rococo dentist, mamma. A dentist’s art should conceal art, surely.”

Vera continued.

“And we met friends of the Mainwarings ; and one was disguised as Sir Walter Raleigh—one of papa’s heroes, you know.”

“And, of course, he discovered me,” said Felicity, “because Sir Walter Raleigh brought the baked potato into England. His real name was Claude, and I introduced him to Vera ; and then he introduced his greatest friend on earth, Gussy, to me.”

“Claude and Gussy ! Is this quite nice, Felicity ? ” asked Mrs. Fairbrother.

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"Yes, mamma, quite nice—delicious in fact. But you must listen. Gussy went as a poached egg—yes, he did. It was marvellous. He had just the helpless, appealing expression of a poached egg on toast. He even danced like a poached egg, if you can believe it, didn't he, Vera? And at the end he got a prize for one of the best costumes, and we all cheered madly."

"It pains me to hear these things," said Mrs. Fairbrother. "I don't like the picture at all, Felicity. Girls seem to have lost their reticence, aloofness, challenge. They squander their real powers and fling away their best weapons. They never do anything by halves now. Instead of fluttering evasively, discreetly, they plunge headlong. The old, allusive, Victorian touch appears to have gone altogether."

"Education teaches the value of concentration, mamma," explained Vera, and Felicity supported her.

"Yes, you must concentrate if you want anything in these days of terrific competition, mamma. You Victorian girls never seemed to want anything."

"Oh, yes, we did ; and we got what we wanted too," answered Mrs. Fairbrother.

"You got papa certainly," admitted Vera ; but Felicity had not finished.

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"We experiment; we take risks that you never dared," she said. "Life is really only another name for taking risks, if you have anything in you."

"Dangerous—dangerous, Felicity. I often wish you were both more sagacious, reserved, far-sighted, cautious, reasonable and patient—more like me in fact."

"Mamma!" they exclaimed simultaneously.

"I mean it. It is affection, not vanity that makes me speak. But a girl seldom sees much to admire in her mother's gifts. Too well I know it. The middle-aged have a good deal to put up with, Vera."

"And nobody's more sorry for them than I am," replied her elder daughter. "They're very pathetic. To see people taking about little bottles for little pains, and little pillows for little aches. It's horribly sad."

"Yes, and saying it's time to go to bed, just when one begins to feel alive," added Felicity. "When people begin to be fond of going to bed, you know the game's up for them."

"We have no wish to share your ferocious pleasures, my child."

"And they only look at a menu, like a hand in a game—to see what to discard," continued Felicity. "We never look at menus except for greediness. We discard nothing but old frocks."

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We dash gaily, pluckily on through life, proving everything."

"And cleaving to what is good I should hope," said her mother.

"Yes, mamma; and that brings us back to Claude and Gussy. We saw more and more of them. Something drew them."

"And us," said Felicity.

"In a word, dearest, dearest mamma, we're engaged!"

It was Vera who spoke, and her mother started from the couch on which she sat, then dropped back with a massive reverberation of gold ornaments. It was like the sound of a falling wave. Felicity rescued her coffee cup.

"This is infamous, abominable, Vera!" cried Mrs. Fairbrother.

"Mother, keep your nerve and don't make it harder for us than it's going to be," replied Felicity firmly.

"We live for each other, mamma," said Vera. "We are all four in the seventh heaven."

"And not a breath, not a word about it till now! Have you no consideration, no human feeling for your father, or for me?"

"It is because we have so much, mamma, that we hesitated," declared Vera. "There are certain grave complications, and it's no good denying them."

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"But only one supreme difficulty," explained her sister. "By a most unfortunate coincidence, mamma, both Claude and Augustus have been called to a position in life that dear papa mistakenly hates."

Thus, ere she had recovered from one blow, their parent was stricken by another; for she guessed with feminine intuition what was now to fall upon her. Josiah Fairbrother entertained two very strong and unconquerable prejudices. He was a man incapable of hate in particular, for his nature inclined to peace and goodwill; but life had awakened antipathies and, while he hated no individual, he abhorred a class. Nay, two; and as we may detest a County Council, or other body of men acting as wolves in unison, while entertaining no special loathing for the constituent members of the gang, so Mr. Fairbrother, for reasons that he regarded as sufficient, allowed himself two illogical but ungovernable objections.

Now his wife voiced them, gazing first upon her dark daughter and then upon the fair one, with growing terror in her eyes.

"They're not lords? They're not lawyers?" she gasped. "You know your father's deep-seated, inveterate, unchanging abomination of both?"

"We do," answered Felicity in a voice of

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gloom. "It has become a silly habit of dear papa's to dislike lords and lawyers."

"The only bad habit he has," added Vera.

"This is unspeakable!" cried Mrs. Fairbrother. Then she ordered them to make their meaning clear.

"Tell me all without evasion," she said.

"In a word, dear mamma, mine's a lawyer," replied Felicity soothingly.

"And mine's a lord," cooed Vera.

Their mother stared at them helplessly. She took a jewelled bottle of salts from a little bag upon her wrist, shut her eyes and sniffed. Then she revived.

"How wicked—how infamous—how weak-minded—how absolutely insane! Both to do this! The whole of London to choose from, and yet—this appalling folly! And knowing your father's views—views far too deeply established ever to change under any compulsion on earth!"

"Wicked, perhaps—not weak-minded, mamma. You can call me anything you like but that," said Felicity.

"You have deliberately set out to court misery for us all. And you knew it from the first—long before you had passed the stage when there was no stopping. The moment that you heard the truth about these wretched men, you ought to

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have remembered your father, Vera ; and you did remember him ! ”

“ One’s parents at such a moment become rather filmy, mamma,” confessed Vera.

“ It’s really only a theory with papa,” ventured Felicity. “ And practice knocks the bottom out of theory every time. I wouldn’t even call it a theory.”

“ It’s a conviction,” declared Mrs. Fairbrother, “ an absolute conviction.”

“ A prejudice is the right name for it ; and papa is really far too big a man to be bound down by a prejudice. I dare say it will be their privilege to enlarge his mind,” said Felicity, assuming a cheerfulness that she was far from feeling.

“ How little you understand your father. Tell me who these men are—if you know. I dare say you don’t.”

Vera brightened.

“ Now we’re coming to happier things,” she replied. “ They’re both famous and both in ‘ Who’s Who.’ My betrothed is Lord Claude Mountracey, of Mountracey, in Devonshire, and Traceytown, in Ireland.”

Mrs. Fairbrother started at a not unfamiliar name.

“ That’s one of our castles,” she said, and Vera admitted it.

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“Yes, mamma. The Mountraceys were deprived of their beautiful Devonshire home in Tudor times. They quarrelled with Henry VIII, and he took their castle away and they never got it back again. Claude rather thinks that one of them was beheaded about it. He’s thirty-one—fair—rich; but not outrageously rich. A great democrat and thinker, and very interested in the housing question. He sees eye to eye with papa in everything. His own place and estates are in Wales, and he has a suite of chambers overlooking Hyde Park.”

“And that’s all you know about him?” asked her mother.

“I know everything about him,” replied Vera quietly; “but that’s all that matters to anybody but me. He has a very beautiful character, hasn’t he, Felicity?”

“Yes,” replied her sister, “very beautiful indeed. And mine is called Augustus Griffin, mamma. Mr. Augustus Griffin, K.C., M.P. He stands six foot, four inches; he also stands for East Marpledon—as an advanced Liberal and Coalitionist. He too, curiously enough, echoes papa. It might almost be papa talking. He is dark—and that shows it must be real love, mamma, because I always vowed I’d never marry a dark man. And he’s dazzlingly clever. Where he will get to with me to help him, he doesn’t

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know himself. He says the 'Woolsack' ought to be well within his grasp. At least, you don't grasp it—you sit on it."

Mrs. Fairbrother had fallen into a pensive mood.

"I never thought that either of you could have done anything quite so headstrong and futile," she said. "It's madness. There's no excuse—none."

"Claude," explained Vera, "is not a lord on purpose, mamma. You must be just and judge people by themselves, not by the accident of their birth. He had to be a lord: he was born so."

"That makes no difference whatever in your father's eyes, Vera," responded the distracted elder. "He will say that, in such a case, you have the fatal legacy of blood handed down from heaven knows what rascal; because the pedigree of these people, if you can trace it far enough back, almost invariably begins with a very undesirable person; while as to new creations, the faulty ideals and ambitions that aspire to a peerage are anathema to your father."

"I have carefully warned Claude of all this," replied Vera. "He quite understands the situation and comes in simple hope, sanctified by his adoration for me. If a lord can conquer dear papa, Claude will do it. There's something so large-minded and humble and ingenuous about

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him. He's not, perhaps, clever in the sense that Gussy is clever ; but he's good. You must love him, mamma—not for my sake, but his own.”

Mrs. Fairbrother sighed.

“ And you,” she said, turning to Felicity, “ you to lose your proud heart to a Member of Parliament masquerading as a poached egg ! When I think of your education I could weep.”

“ Don't, mamma,” replied Felicity. “ My education first attracted Gussy, then fascinated him. He knows education when he sees it. So many people don't. A man needs to be fairly well educated himself to understand what I am. Gussy is. He almost gloated on my accomplishments.”

“ You're a vain idiot, Felicity ! ” replied her mother. “ I'm bitterly shocked and disappointed with you both.”

“ We, too, are disappointed in you, dear mamma,” replied Vera, endeavouring to stroke her parent's hand. But Mrs. Fairbrother would not be stroked.

“ If you won't help, you needn't hinder, mamma,” said Felicity. “ Vera and I have a right to ask you not to hinder.”

“ ‘ Hinder,’ wicked girl ? I'm thinking of your father, not you.”

“ Mamma, you must be fair,” began Vera. “ You must make an effort and look back into

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your youth and remember what you felt like when you were on the centre of the stage in your turn, and fell in love and had your first exquisite thrill when you thought of papa. Old people always say they remember what it felt like to be young. They always begin like that when they start to lecture you. But in reality——”

Her sister interrupted her. A Louis Quatorze clock had just chimed one quarter to nine.

“I think we ought to remember,” she said, “that they’ll be here in ten minutes. They motor down in Gussy’s car to see the Venus of Naxos together. And they want to make us all radiantly happy, if possible, before they go home again.”

“What do you mean? Coming here to-night?”

Once more Mrs. Fairbrother fell back upon her smelling-salts.

“The Bronze was a blind, mamma,” explained Vera. “They’ll love to see it, of course; who doesn’t? Especially Claude: he worships beautiful things by instinct, though he doesn’t understand them. But their idea, you see, was to approach papa by harmless stealth and disarm him with their tact and extraordinary charm.”

“It was Gussy’s idea,” explained Felicity. “He knows what amazing genius he has for getting round people; and if he can bring hard-

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headed juries to his way of thinking and make them cry openly in the jury-box, and save all sorts of shady people from the just consequences of their shadiness, then we have a right to hope that he will impress his personality upon papa."

"They can't both fail," declared Vera. "When you have seen what they are, mamma, you will understand that it is impossible for both to fail with papa. A demon would yield to Claude."

"After all, we're two grown-up women, mamma," added Felicity. "You must discover yourself before anybody else can discover you—so Gussy says. And it's wonderfully true; for almost the moment Vera and I discovered ourselves we were discovered."

"By dear Claude and Gussy," concluded her sister.

"You may have discovered yourselves, and a pretty poor discovery it appears to have been," replied Mrs. Fairbrother. "But you certainly have not yet discovered your father. Now you may do so. And as these imaginary engagements will be broken off before either of you go to bed to-night, I can only hope you have been discreet in the company of these misguided men—not silly and confidential."

"Perfect love casts out caution, mamma," replied Vera; "but not family pride, or maiden reserve."

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“It was for them to be confidential—not us,” said Felicity, with her head in the air.

“Fond fool!” was all Mrs. Fairbrother could say. She found Felicity a greater trial than Vera on this painful occasion; yet Vera had been quite as determined, if less assertive, than her younger sister. It was Vera who now raised another plea.

“At least be passive, dearest mamma. Don’t try and influence papa. Let him judge of them as he finds them.”

“In fact, be sporting, mamma,” summed up Felicity. “You can very well trust papa.”

“I leave it to him gladly enough,” replied her mother; and as she did so Mr. Fairbrother entered the library.

II

JOSIAH

THE master of Orchard Dene was of a tall and spare build. His face under one aspect powerfully suggested Abraham Lincoln, while a second glance reminded one of the Memnon. His fan-shaped beard, on a countenance otherwise clean shaven, added to the Egyptian suggestion. He had dressed his hair thus as a navvy and never departed from that manner. There was something imposing about him, and his blue eyes suggested more than a successful prince of industry. They were large and brilliant and might have not disgraced a poet. His mouth was mobile and full of expression. In repose his countenance was watchful, but not unkindly ; when interested, great animation awoke about him, and at times he gesticulated with large, well-shapen hands.

Josiah Fairbrother contrived never to be in the fashion. His dinner jacket was of antique cut, and he wore a "made-up" black tie that gave his family pain. If a respectable man's shirt-

front demanded two studs, Mr. Fairbrother would be wearing one or three ; if one or three were required by the usages of society, Mr. Fairbrother might be counted upon for two.

He brushed his thick, grey hair straight back from a full forehead and spoke slowly, in a deep, not unmelodious voice.

He was smoking a cigar, and now he sat down beside his wife on the sofa. The act revealed that he had unbuttoned the lowest button of his waistcoat. It was a little habit of his earlier days after an ample meal.

“ You’re smelling your salts — what’s the matter ? ” he asked.

She buttoned his waistcoat, and Felicity, with quick presence of mind, replied for her.

“ We’ve quite flustered dear mater. You see, by an extraordinary coincidence, papa, when in London Vera and I met these—these archæologists—who are coming here this evening to see the Bronze.”

“ Sometimes,” said Mr. Fairbrother, “ I feel that the Venus of Naxos is rather hard on you women—indeed, hard upon us all. You ask how ? Well, it cannot be denied that she destroys our family privacy—that most sacred thing. And yet, what is one to do, Sophy ? Her glorious message can be denied to none. She must not hide her light under a bushel. She belongs to me

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indeed, but, in a larger and truer sense, she is the possession of mankind. Sometimes I nerve myself to part from her ; and then again I feel I cannot do it. A day seems incomplete without her stimulus and refreshment."

"You must never part from her," declared his wife. "Let everything go rather than the Bronze. We know at least a part of what you feel to her and what she means to you."

Mr. Fairbrother's wonderful blue eyes glowed.

"How like you—how like you ! Similarly with the castles," he continued, "one is merely the possessor ; the joy and real inner content of such treasures must be shared with all who are capable of sharing it. Now and again the necessity may clash with personal comfort and threaten the peace of the home circle, as to-night. I do not mind for myself, but regret the trouble involved for others."

Then he turned to Felicity.

"These visitors are not archæologists, as you imagine," he said. "And if they told you they were, they took the name of that solemn profession in vain. One is a lord, the other a lawyer ; yet justice prevents my denying even such men the Venus."

"Don't be prejudiced by this unfortunate accident," pleaded Vera. "They are charming people, papa."

He shook his head.

"I shall never forget that the guile of lawyers nearly deprived me of my fish-plate patent," he answered.

"But when you took it to the House of Lords you were gloriously vindicated—remember that," said Vera.

"I try to be just—such persons are heavily handicapped," admitted Mr. Fairbrother. "But it is in my blood to mistrust them. And I could offer very sufficient reasons for doing so. Again and again I have given such men opportunity to rehabilitate their orders in my opinion; and again and again have they failed. It may be my misfortune as an individual rather than their fault as a class; but the fact remains—I loathe and detest them. It is a deep and abiding principle. Not this or that man, you understand—I never allow myself to hate a man; but all they stand for in the body politic."

"You are so merciful by nature, papa," murmured Vera; and then the butler entered.

"The gentlemen are here," he announced.

"And what manner of men are they, Nupkins?" inquired his master. Mr. Fairbrother was on terms of intimacy and friendship with the servant. They entertained very genuine admiration each for the other; and Nupkins belonged to an antique and faithful, feudal order of

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domestic, now practically removed from the earth by progress and the laws of evolution.

He handed two cards to Mr. Fairbrother and answered as he did so :

“ Young gentlemen—very good looking—showy, you might say. But I’ve known as good to look at turn out bad.”

“ Only on the films, I’m sure, Nupkins,” suggested Felicity. But Nupkins was not prepared to hear any ill of the films. The cinematograph had of late years not a little unsettled his opinions—an effect that it will be found to achieve in the minds of the middle-aged.

“ You mustn’t let the pictures ruin your trust in human nature, Nupkins,” said Vera.

“ Truth’s truth, miss,” he replied.

Mr. Fairbrother read the cards.

“ ‘ Lord Claude Mountracey ’—I’ve got his castle in Devonshire. ‘ Mr. Augustus Griffin, K.C., M.P.’ Such men, I fear, are little likely to feel any genuine interest for archaic Greek art.”

“ Wait till you see them, papa,” replied Felicity.

“ They are enthusiasts, papa,” declared Vera, “ and they will like you quite as much as they like the Bronze.”

“ I beg them to do nothing of the kind,” replied Mr. Fairbrother. “ Do not seek to entangle

me, or associate my name with lord or lawyer, Vera. You mean well, but you know not what you do. Entertain these gentlemen here for ten minutes if you please ; then I will relieve you. It is necessary that I write two letters and finish my cigar. I will then return."

With these words Josiah Fairbrother left his wife and daughters ; and Nupkins, removing the coffee-cups, followed him to fetch the visitors from the drawing-room.

"Nothing could possibly be better, dearest mamma !" exclaimed Vera, when they were alone. "Now you'll be able to judge for yourself."

"Approach them with an open mind for our sakes, mamma," begged Felicity ; but Mrs. Fairbrother promised nothing.

"You heard your father," she replied.

A moment later Nupkins introduced Lord Mountracey and Mr. Griffin.

III

THE BRIGHT ENTRY OF CLAUDE AND AUGUSTUS

THEY were tall young men in the prime of life and the pink of condition. They presented a pleasant contrast, for one was fair and fresh, with curly, golden hair, a moderate brow, pale, honest eyes and a nose of elegant and patrician contour; while the other had sleek, black hair, dark brown eyes that brimmed with intelligence, a nose strong and not undistinguished, and a mouth that spoke of determination and forcefulness. His forehead was large and full; his face of a somewhat olive complexion, singularly animated. He was clean shaved, while his friend wore a heavy, amber-coloured moustache. Their shoulders were broad, their stride long and masculine. They were, in fact, a rather exceptional pair of young men, fresh, healthy, prosperous and apparently happy. They wore evening dress with white waistcoats and appeared to be exceedingly fond of each other.

ENTRY OF CLAUDE AND AUGUSTUS

It would indeed have been quite impossible for any reasonably minded person to feel anything but friendly to either on a first acquaintance; but Mrs. Fairbrother unhappily knew enough about them to darken her introduction. She gazed upon their beaming countenances with gloom and responded but feebly to their attractive bows. Mr. Griffin bowed the better, with an almost southern abandon of the lumbar muscles; Lord Mountracey revealed his lineage and inclined with less grace. Nevertheless, by that almost uncanny instinct for which she was famous, and which life had given her many opportunities to develop, Sophia Fairbrother preferred him from the first to his friend. Time, that has an art to lift up and cast down, was destined to strengthen Mrs. Fairbrother in her opinion and exalt her first impressions to a pinnacle of conviction, only to destroy them again and leave her to the end of her life bewildered and indeterminate between the lawyer and the lord.

Vera was the first to greet them and extended her hand to the man of her choice.

"How do you do, Claude?" she asked, and then turned to her mother.

"This is Lord Mountracey, dear mamma."

Meantime Felicity had saluted the Barrister-at-Law.

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"How are you, Augustus? My mother—Mr. Griffin."

"I think this extraordinarily kind, Mrs. Fairbrother," began Lord Mountracey, "exceedingly kind to allow such intrusion at such an hour."

His voice was big and amiable, but spoke too surely of caste.

"You must thank my husband, Lord Mount-racey, not me," replied Mrs. Fairbrother.

"Most kind, most kind," echoed Augustus.

His speech was resonant, quick and exceedingly clear.

"Most generous," he continued, "to allow a couple of connoisseurs."

"You needn't dwell on that, Gussy. Mamma knows."

It was his betrothed who spoke, and Augustus turned to her and dropped his voice.

"I see she does; and I'm afraid she doesn't like it."

"But Mrs. Fairbrother will hear us," pleaded the peer.

The lady was standing looking at them doubtfully and without friendship.

"Only to-night have my daughters condescended to announce this extraordinary arrangement," she said.

"We may hope——?"

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"I beg you'll do no such thing—either of you. It is an unheard of affair. Engagements are not made in this offhand way."

"I assure you they are, Mrs. Fairbrother," declared Mr. Griffin. "People think so quickly now. Thanks to higher education, our brains move in a way that would have astounded our forefathers. Our generation has such a faculty for making up its mind."

"And changing its mind," replied Mrs. Fairbrother.

"Love at first sight is by no means a poet's dream," asserted Lord Mountracey. He had thought of this coming down from London in his friend's motor-car.

But Mrs. Fairbrother was prepared with an answer.

"It must be—at a fancy dress ball," she replied sharply.

Claude could not make the obvious retort, but Vera furnished it.

"True love penetrates every disguise, mamma," she said.

"Good, Vera," cried Claude heartily.

Then Vera's mother went to the root of the subject.

"You're hopelessly, utterly wrong, all of you ; and you know it. I can't pretend that these alleged engagements give me any pleasure at all,

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and I know they must cause my husband very great pain."

"We would sooner do anything on earth than cause him pain," replied Claude. Then Augustus spoke.

"We had rather hoped our public records and our characters—nowadays everything depends on character."

"It always did," replied Mrs. Fairbrother.

"But you are standing. I pray you will sit down, Mrs. Fairbrother," begged Lord Mount-racey.

In a moment or two Vera and Felicity had each brought a chair and the young men now sat in them, while her daughters settled one to the right, one to the left of their mother on the lounge.

"Character," began Augustus, "is the touch-stone. You see really very few distinguished characters."

"I am privileged to live with one," said Mrs. Fairbrother.

"With two," ventured Claude.

"I refer to my husband, Lord Mountracey. He is, as you may or may not know, a genius, yet modest; a man of iron will, yet gentle, sympathetic understanding, and tolerant—even to the young."

"That sounds hopeful, if I may say so," replied Claude.

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"Mr. Fairbrother is a lesson—an example of the rarest character," declared Augustus. "People, in my experience, generally seem to stagnate, or petrify, as they grow older. The first sort get squashy, like a vegetable marrow; the second hard, like fossils."

"And they're both horrid—and both everywhere apparently," added Felicity.

"You will find my husband neither a marrow, nor a fossil," said Mrs. Fairbrother.

"He is a fossil about lords and lawyers, mamma; he's not a free spirit anyway," replied her younger daughter.

But Claude reproved her.

"Nobody can be free, Felicity. It's contrary to nature," he said.

Mrs. Fairbrother was surprised.

"Very true. I'm glad you think so," she answered.

Felicity, however, was prepared to argue.

"All brave, fearless people are free," she answered. "Take Gussy—he's free as air."

"Then he's light as air," replied Mrs. Fairbrother sternly.

"He's twelve stone, six pounds, mamma."

"I hope," said Augustus—"I hope and believe that I carry moral as well as physical weight. Freedom is indeed a myth if you're honest, and nobody knows that better than Claude and I.

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We are zealous, earnest, industrious and conscientious citizens ; and we want to leave the world better than we find it, do we not, Claude ? ”

“ We do,” answered his friend, “ and we shall—with assistance.”

“ Well, you’re pleased with yourselves,” said Mrs. Fairbrother.

“ Only reasonably hopeful, I assure you,” responded Lord Mountracey. “ We don’t admire lords or lawyers ourselves particularly. Lawyers I suppose we shall always have with us ; but lords have got to go. The hereditary legislator is as archaic as—as——”

“ My smile,” said Felicity.

“ As the Venus of Naxos,” continued Claude. “ And, of course, the righteous must suffer with the guilty.”

“ Fine patrician spirits, like my friend, Lord Mountracey, will retire to their mountain fastnesses,” prophesied Augustus, “ but only to be hunted down and poked out and destroyed by the proletariat.”

“ It may happen. I shall go game. But Augustus would hate going,” smiled Claude.

“ He wouldn’t go,” declared Felicity. “ When Augustus has reached the ‘ Woolsack,’ as he will, if they only give him time, then, though a lord, he’d be much too clever to go. He’d fling the

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‘Woolsack’ to the winds, or use the wool to blind the eyes of the leaders of the Revolution.”

“I understand that Mr. Fairbrother and I think alike upon every subject,” said Augustus; but Mrs. Fairbrother assured him it was not so.

“You’ll find yourself mistaken, Mr. Griffin,” she replied.

“My admiration for Mr. Fairbrother as the father of Vera——” began Lord Mountracey; and the lady stopped him.

“As the mother of Vera I can assure you both, once and for all, that the case is hopeless—utterly hopeless,” she declared.

“The question must be lifted out of the domain of prejudice for all our sakes,” asserted Augustus.

“Nevertheless,” replied his friend, “Mr. Fairbrother is a great and renowned man and entitled to his opinions. They may not be prejudices at all.”

“The wife of such a man is also great,” answered Augustus, “if she will permit me to say so. And I should much like to learn if Mrs. Fairbrother, with her feminine intuition and wide experience of life, considers that one should be judged by his own personality, or by the accident of his birth, or profession?”

“You never saw anything about lords and

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lawyers to hate, did you, mamma?" inquired Vera, holding her mother's hand.

"Personally I have not," confessed Mrs. Fairbrother, "but, unfortunately, your father has."

"Exceptions prove the rule," said Claude. He had thought of this on the way down also.

The party moved and Felicity invited Augustus to inspect the contents of the silver-table; while Vera whispered a word into Claude's ear. She said "Joseph" under her breath, and Claude remembered a subject that he had been informed might melt, or help to melt, the maternal heart.

"Tell me about your son, Mrs. Fairbrother," he begged. "He, too, is famous, so Vera tells me."

"Going to be," said Vera.

"He's a wonderful boy, no doubt," admitted the mother. "The world will hear of Joseph sooner or later I suppose."

"A prophet of the future?"

"Possibly; and has begun, like so many prophets, in disgrace."

"Not at Eton, mamma."

"Foolishly I prevailed upon his father, against my husband's better judgment, to send him there," confessed Mrs. Fairbrother; but the peer protested.

"Don't say that; I went to Eton," he replied.

"He became a 'pop,' or was 'in pop,'"

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explained Vera. "That let him off brushing his hair and saying his prayers, I believe."

"Pardon me, no. The privileges of 'pop' are coloured waistcoats and permission to turn up your trousers. I, too, was a 'pop.'"

"He was constantly photographed in 'The Daily Looking Glass' jumping over hurdles and falling into ponds," said Mrs. Fairbrother.

"The illustrated papers always show public schoolboys playing with very little on. If sometimes they would let us see them at their desks working in their proper clothes, I'm sure many parents would like it better."

"Waterloo was won on the *plains* of Eton," said Claude.

"But what's won on the forms of Eton?" inquired Mrs. Fairbrother.

"Then Joseph went to Oxford, to be a double blue and a double first," continued Vera.

"What a typical Englishman!" exclaimed Claude.

"Yes; but unfortunately he abandoned both of these innocent ambitions. He found sport, as practised at the University, bad for his intellect and the lectures of the Dons even worse," said Mrs. Fairbrother.

"He founded a society called 'The Iconoclasts,'" explained Vera; "and they had all sorts of modern geniuses down to lecture to them ;

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and they drank coffee and smoked cigarettes into the small hours and put the world right. And then the wretched Dons didn't like Joseph's ideas about the world, and, after he'd lectured himself, they rent him and sent him down as a malign influence."

"The worm will turn," said Claude. "Of course, Dons are often worms. They did the same to Shelley."

"And now he's in America lecturing—I don't know what about—and getting material for a book," declared the mother of Joseph.

"A poet, I expect," said Claude.

But Mrs. Fairbrother would not allow this. Indeed, she took it somewhat seriously.

"Not for an instant," she replied. "Prose—all prose. There's not a spark of poetry in any of us. We hate it. Get Joseph's photograph, Vera. Art will be the war-cry of the next generation—so my son believes."

"No doubt—if he says so," admitted Lord Mountracey humbly.

"He's amazingly gifted and courageous and so on. I don't pretend to understand him. But he's quite wonderful," continued Mrs. Fairbrother.

"Like Vera," suggested Claude.

"No, like mamma," answered Vera, returning with the photograph of a high-browed, fierce-eyed young man with masses of heavy black hair. He

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gazed defiantly from the frame and suggested lack of discipline and pugnacity to his lordship's eye. But he did not say so.

"In the war he was the youngest colonel in the British Army," said Joseph's sister, "and when they made him a colonel he became so furious that he nearly ran away and joined the enemy. He said that he could bear no more. What is it about a colonel that creates disrespect? Majors and captains and generals don't. But nobody takes a colonel seriously—especially if he's a retired one. Tunbridge Wells swarms with them."

But Claude appeared to be absorbed with the photograph of Joseph.

"Amazingly handsome—most arrestive. A man you'd look round after anywhere. What a forehead—what eagle eyes!" he murmured, examining the photograph intently and comparing it first with Mrs. Fairbrother, then with Vera.

"He's like you both," he said.

Elsewhere Augustus was toying with a massive silver scarab.

"The Third Dynasty," explained Felicity.

"The men who made these things lived for art," declared the Member of Parliament. He was looking at the girl, not the beetle.

"They put it before every other thought," he continued.

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"Yes, they always put something first ; but it's never us," she replied.

It was impossible to take up the challenge adequately, so Augustus merely answered in words.

"You, at least, know better," he answered.

"We only fit into niches ; we're never the temple," declared Felicity.

"You're my temple and the goddess in my temple," he assured her ; but she shook her head.

"You think so for the minute ; but you're wrong. I may have an archaic smile, but I haven't got an archaic mind. One of the things that education has done is to teach women a great deal more than they ever knew about men."

"So much the better," answered Augustus.

"For the women, yes. It's strange, though, to think that generations of us lived and died and never knew anything more about you than you chose to tell us."

"We always told the best we had to tell," argued Augustus. "Reserve was the highest compliment we could pay you. We were wrong, no doubt, but we meant well."

"Women feel to men like Labour feels to Capital," declared Felicity. "We've been the sufferer too long. You must allow for a good deal of sex prejudice, Gussy ; it's just as natural as class prejudice."

"Be prejudiced against every man but me,

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then," urged the King's Counsel. Then Claude called to his friend.

"Come and look at the photograph of Mrs. Fairbrother's son, Augustus. I never saw such a striking personality."

"By Jove! A remarkable face—character—vision—genius. I should like to know that man," exclaimed Augustus, holding the photograph almost reverently.

"I hope you will some day," said Felicity. "You'd do him good."

"Here's dear papa!" cried Vera, and the tall form of Josiah Fairbrother filled the doorway. With a lightning glance he took in the two young men, who rose and bowed as he appeared. Then he advanced and extended his hand to Claude.

"How do you do, Lord Mountracey?" he asked. "And how do you do, Mr. Griffin?" he continued, turning to the lawyer.

"This is uncommonly kind, sir—uncommonly kind," said Augustus.

"We feel under a great sense of obligation. You are too good, Mr. Fairbrother," added Claude.

"My duty is my duty. The Venus of Naxos must be denied to none," replied the owner of that treasure. "Are you experts, or merely enthusiasts?"

"I should claim to be something of an expert

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in ordinary company," answered Augustus, who had been reading Greek Bronzes with diligence during the last four-and-twenty hours. "But not in yours," he concluded.

"I am merely an enthusiast," said Claude.

"Will you take coffee?" asked Mrs. Fairbrother, and Felicity squeezed Vera's hand out of sight. Could it be that their mother was relenting?

"No, no, nothing, thanks. Most kind, though," replied Claude.

"A cigarette, then?" asked Felicity.

"Indeed, no," replied Augustus. "We mustn't detain Mr. Fairbrother a moment longer than is necessary."

"I am always prepared to expatiate on the Bronze," confessed their host. "I haven't seen it myself since breakfast."

"Papa takes the Venus three times a day after meals—like medicine," explained Felicity.

Her mother rose.

"We'll leave you, then," she said.

"May I venture to hope we shall have the pleasure of seeing you again before we go?" suggested Augustus.

"That will depend on my husband," replied the lady in a voice somewhat ominous.

"Bring them into the drawing-room to say good night, papa," begged Vera, and her excited

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intonation mildly surprised her parent. For Vera was not, so far as he knew, emotional. Augustus opened the door, and Felicity whispered a word as she followed her mother and sister.

“Don’t pretend you know anything whatever about bronzes,” she said. “If you do, papa will bowl you out instantly and despise you.”

The men were left together.

IV

THE CONVICTIONS OF MR. FAIRBROTHER

“**I** GATHER you are connoisseurs. Are you collectors also?” inquired Mr. Fairbrother, waving the friends to their chairs.

“I have a few heirlooms,” replied Claude.

“So much the better. Keep them,” urged Mr. Fairbrother. “Everything worth a dollar goes to America nowadays. It argues a lack of patriotic feeling and self-respect on the part of our ancient families.”

“It is in order to preserve their self-respect that they part with them,” explained Claude.

“Those blessed with brains don’t sell their heirlooms: they sell themselves—to preserve their heirlooms,” remarked Augustus. “Thus they get the dollars which enable them to keep their treasures.”

“American wives, good though they may be, are a doubtful exchange for European masterpieces,” said Mr. Fairbrother. “A man might sacrifice himself in marriage for the welfare of

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future generations and the salvation of his bric-à-brac. But such altruism is rare."

"In the case of Claude, birth happens to be an unmerited accident," declared Augustus, opening the attack. "He thinks as we do."

"And how does Lord Mountracey think, if I may inquire?"

"Democratically."

"Not a 'backwoodsman'?"

"On the contrary, a pioneer," asserted Augustus.

"Nevertheless, I honour my ancestors, where history shows them worthy of honour," said his friend.

Josiah Fairbrother approved this attitude.

"Quite right," he replied. "What did they do?"

"They did nothing but their duty. They lived without challenging the public eye."

"They achieved no national distinction?"

"It is almost impossible to achieve national distinction if you only do your duty," explained Claude. "Distinction, Mr. Fairbrother, implies a great deal more or a great deal less than that. Distinction demands gifts, or defects, of character. We were upholders of Church and State; we were tender to the poor and exercised our feudal powers like gentlemen. For hundreds of

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years we proved honest and loyal to the highest principles."

"To be honest for hundreds of years is a very remarkable achievement in itself," said Mr. Fairbrother courteously.

"We quarrelled with Henry VIII, however," continued Claude.

"Who wouldn't?" asked Mr. Fairbrother.

"From that time our power diminished; but, even in comparative seclusion, I think I may say we continued to be good."

"You can be too good, Claude," asserted his friend. "You can be stuffily, obstinately, narrow-mindedly good. It is, in fact, the pig-headed good people who make the world so difficult. The bad people do comparatively little harm—you can leave them to us. But the State will really have to control the busy good people. They are becoming an increasing danger. There is no more dangerous combination than a heart of gold and a brain of putty."

Mr. Fairbrother regarded this statement without approval.

"You are at the Bar and in the House, I believe?" he asked.

"At present, yes, Mr. Fairbrother. The House is either a millstone or a stepping-stone, as you doubtless know. In my case I regard it as a stepping-stone."

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The elder shook his head.

“Not so did you talk to your constituents, I imagine. But what can one expect from those suckled in the Inns of Court? The Law is a very demoralising profession, Mr. Griffin. It distorts perspective, promotes craft, creates an immoral bent of mind and weakens the voice of conscience.”

“Don’t say ‘conscience,’ Mr. Fairbrother,” begged Augustus.

“I am sorry to do so. But truth is truth.”

“Human nature remains human nature, even at the Bar. In fact, it takes all sorts to make a world—I wish it didn’t,” sighed Mr. Griffin.

“And human nature embraces everybody—though how it can embrace some people I often wonder,” mused the peer.

“Civilisation is rapidly becoming a pitched battle with you lawyers,” declared Mr. Fairbrother. “We groan under advocacy. You have this nation in the hollow of your hand, and you squeeze it. You make the laws and we’ve got to keep them. We can still be born without your assistance, but nothing else. Precedent is the curse of the country.”

But the King’s Counsel felt constrained to question such severe criticism.

“Advocacy is at the roots of our culture, my dear sir,” he replied. “What does Lord Birken-

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head say? Or, rather, what did he say as Solicitor-General, in 1913? He remarked that ‘the advocate discharges a function vital to the very existence of civilised society.’”

Mr. Fairbrother regarded him steadfastly.

“You quote Lord Birkenhead—the Rupert of the Bar, the Boanerges of Debate, that most flamboyant and perilous person! Then doubtless you will permit me to quote him also. The existing ex-Lord Chancellors, I may remark, have received in pensions up to the present time somewhere near four hundred thousand pounds of State money. The attitude adopted by some of them to the War will not have escaped you. But that by the way. I committed the following words to memory: they were so stupendous. Lord Birkenhead uttered them, for the world to hear, when he addressed the American Bar Association in the United States. He said: ‘We have, I believe, fastened upon the laity of this country and our own a higher degree of responsibility than we have ever accepted in our own case, because every layman is bound at his peril to understand the law; but, as I understand your law and mine, we lawyers can only be called upon for a reasonable understanding of the law.’ Have legalism and craft combined ever matched that for barefaced cynicism? The lawyers laughed, no doubt; but America did not

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laugh, I imagine, and England certainly did not laugh."

"A good joke, dear Mr. Fairbrother," declared Augustus.

"It is no joke," answered the elder. "We have a right to demand the same standard of morality from our judges and barristers as from our physicians. If the physician denies new and efficacious remedies, the community would execrate him and cast him out; but that is what legalism is doing every day of the week."

"Believe me, a country gets the law it deserves," said Augustus rather feebly.

"Then let us pray this country will soon awake and cease to deserve it," answered the elder. "Let us hope that you will be driven to reform from outside, forced to codify, as all other nations have done, and commanded by an outraged nation to abandon your hateful Inns of Court and all they stand for."

"Abandon the Inns of Court?" gasped Augustus. "Never!"

"We have rid the world of Kaiserism," responded Josiah Fairbrother calmly. "We must rid it of legalism also, in the interests of justice. The way is clear. We spoke of Lord Chancellors. Tell me this. Why is the Lord Chancellor always a lawyer?"

"It's the blue ribbon of the profession."

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“ Since when ? ”

But Augustus did not know.

“ I will tell you,” continued Mr. Fairbrother. “ Since 1673. Before that date the Lord Chancellor was not necessarily a lawyer. He was a great official—something akin to the Minister of Justice, whom we badly need now. He was appointed to keep an eye on legal vagaries and protect the poor and friendless from the scourge of advocacy. In 1673, Mr. Griffin, your abominable profession captured the Lord Chancellorship, as it has also captured the administration of justice—for itself. Yet why must the judge for ever spring from the ranks of advocacy ? Why must a life devoted to the art of persuasion of necessity produce the judicial faculty ? As a matter of fact it does not, and you need only consult Sir Edward Clarke’s interesting recollections to perceive this truth. He is frank. In speaking of the Tranby Croft case, where justice failed once more, he remarks that the late Lord Coleridge prepared and delivered ‘ a very fine specimen of judicial advocacy.’ Mark those words—‘ judicial advocacy.’ They damn a system, and, coming from a great lawyer, indicate the utterly hopeless bent of the legal mind where justice is concerned.”

“ And what ought to be done about it ? ” inquired Augustus, who longed to enter the breach,

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but felt it must be impolite to offer any strenuous opposition. Indeed, his own future might hang upon his restraint.

"I say disestablish the Inns," replied Mr. Fairbrother; "not by violence, as the infuriated people threatened to do in the past—not by fire and slaughter and extermination, as they so justly deserve; but by Act of Parliament. In Ireland, Collett's Inn—the Irish Inn of Court—was raided and its denizens massacred, after the impulsive Irish way. But I am content with constitutional methods."

"And what could take the place of our Inns, Mr. Fairbrother?" asked Augustus. He was really interested.

"I should substitute for the Lord Chancellor a supreme Minister of Justice; and he would never be a lawyer under any conceivable circumstances. But the lawyers would have their needs respected, and though I should employ some of their gigantic vested funds for the advancement of art and science, and other more useful pursuits than the law, there would still be enough to found an Imperial School of Law, wherein justice should be the prime consideration and its attainment the first thought. A lay Minister of Justice, an Imperial School of Law: that is what we demand in this country; and that, I may incidentally remark, is what a Labour Government would

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most unquestionably give us, when they had time to think about it."

"Suppose we change the subject," murmured Claude, who began to feel alarm. Yet there was little need, for their host exhibited no personal animus. He was indignant with a profession, but entertained no apparent distrust of the young barrister who represented it.

"I think the nation would regret the Inns," ventured Augustus; and Mr. Fairbrother's wonderful eyes twinkled.

"I agree with you," he said. "The nation will always bitterly regret them. It will also regret that its own sloth and apathy and lack of courage rendered the Inns possible for such a number of years—that it should for centuries have endured this great profiteering Trust in defiance of justice. As members of the ruling class——"

But Augustus, conscious that he was not shining in the eyes of Claude, struck in here.

"My very dear sir, there is no ruling class, any more than there is a criminal class. Do let me convince you of that. The House of Correction and the House of Commons are both open to everybody. It's often merely a toss up which a man goes to. There are, in fact, only two classes—the striking classes and our own."

"You will never strike," foretold Mr. Fair-

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brother, "but you may some day be locked out ; and, frankly, a lock-out of the lawyers might prove the salvation of the United Kingdom. At least, you should be locked out of the House of Commons, where your activities are peculiarly malignant. Our forefathers banished the lawyers from their Parliament in the reign of Edward III. I trust our children will do the same, for it is more than time."

"Tell us something of yourself, Mr. Fairbrother, if we are not asking too much," begged Claude. "Now that you know the worst there is to know about us," he added.

V

THE KNOWLEDGE OF FELICITY

MR. FAIRBROTHER produced his cigar case.

"In me you see a man of sixty-four," he told them. Simultaneously the visitors answered.

"You don't look it!" they said, and then regarded each other with annoyance unconcealed.

"No, I don't look it; but I often feel it. Try a cigar. You need not fear them. Nupkins understands tobacco better than I do. These are J. S. Murias of the brand 'Vicarios'—if that conveys anything to you."

"You are too kind—a glorious and famous cigar," said Augustus, taking one readily.

"I began life as a navy," continued their host.

"Then you can tell me why they wear those little leathern garters outside their trousers," said Lord Mountracey. "I have often wondered."

"I never found out," replied Mr. Fairbrother. "They didn't seem to know themselves. I never wore them."

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"Your rise to fame is one of the romances of industry," declared Augustus. "The story of the 'Fairbrother Fishplate' is only less wonderful than the results of the discovery. It revolutionised the laying of railway lines and made the permanent way what it is. Your fishplate is, therefore, a symbol of civilisation and progress. It has advanced the welfare of the world, my dear sir. You are more than an engineer—a poet—that best friend of mankind."

But the listener apparently resented this adulation.

"Nothing of the sort. Don't be absurd. No poetry about fishplates," he said rather abruptly.

Augustus, however, knew that no man really objects to being called a poet.

"Pardon me, yes," he replied. "Only the true, if unconscious, artist could have created your fishplate. Poetry is imagination; and imagination is at the root of all great invention. Labour has, indeed, blossomed into actual poetry. One hears of notable poems from the sons of toil."

A strange, almost defiant expression lit the eyes of the self-made man. He was troubled and little liked Mr. Griffin's well-meant compliments.

"Stuff and nonsense!" he said. "Never from a navvy."

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His usual urbanity for a moment appeared to desert the great engineer ; but Claude, who failed to perceive the subject was distasteful, hastened to the succour of his friend.

“ Poets are chiefly born from the ranks of the proletariat,” he said. “ Doubtless, face to face with reality, they receive the divine afflatus oftener, Mr. Fairbrother. They would write more if they had more time, I expect.”

“ ‘ Warblings from a Washerwoman,’ ” suggested Augustus, “ or ‘ Melodies from a Merchant Mariner.’ Sailors are all poets.”

“ And so are nurserymen,” said Claude ; “ their catalogues contain much pure poetry. I am a horticulturist, and I can assure you that they describe flowers and fruits and vegetables that nobody has ever seen, or ever will.”

“ Take a plumber,” continued Augustus.

“ No, no, not a plumber, old chap ! ” protested Claude.

“ Why not ? An oyster lives under conditions quite as damp and depressing, yet he has time to make beautiful things.”

“ ‘ Pearls from a Plumber.’ Good, Gussy ! ” cried his friend.

But now the foolish young men were silenced, and they perceived, to their confusion, that they had tactlessly annoyed their host.

“ Enough of this ! ” said Mr. Fairbrother

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almost harshly. "These pleasantries are ill-timed. I don't like them."

They apologised, and Augustus tried to pass the matter off in a way to please the elder.

"I'm sure your brilliant daughters must write poetry," he said.

"Nothing of the sort—the last thing they would dream of doing," responded Mr. Fairbrother.

"They live poetry, at any rate," declared Claude. "And that," he added, "is far more difficult."

His companion admitted this.

"I know several men at the Bar who write it," he said; "but you can't honestly say they live it."

"Probably nobody could be expected to do both," replied Claude; "too severe a strain."

"The great Victorians both wrote it and lived it," said Mr. Fairbrother shortly.

"The great Victorians never gave themselves away," explained Augustus. "Be sure that, sheltered behind their portentous reputations, they were pretty much like the little Georgians. They didn't kiss and tell quite so often—that's the only difference."

"Do not speak of 'the little Georgians,'" said Mr. Fairbrother. "They may be 'great Georgians' some day, when you and I are forgotten."

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Claude had risen and was surveying the heraldic arms over the bookcase.

"An interesting coat, Mr. Fairbrother," he remarked.

"My daughters desired armorial bearings, and I took them at their word and invented them," replied the master of Orchard Dene.

"They are proud of your work, no doubt?"

"I believe not," replied Mr. Fairbrother.

Lord Mountracey described the coat in detail.

"A wheelbarrow couchant, or, and a spade——"

"A shovel," said Mr. Fairbrother.

"A shovel, sanguine, on a field vert, pied with buttercups and daisies. Motto: 'I call a spade a spade.' A very fine coat indeed."

"The science of heraldry is not without charm," admitted Mr. Fairbrother.

"I, too, have a coat-of-arms," declared Augustus.

"Have you, old man?" exclaimed Claude, not concealing his astonishment.

"Yes—a hippogriff dancing on one leg, like that thing in 'Alice in Wonderland.'"

"You mean in 'Alice Through the Looking-glass,'" said Mr. Fairbrother.

"I may be wrong, but I *think* not," answered the barrister.

"We will clear it up," replied his host.

THE KNOWLEDGE OF FELICITY

"Nothing like certainty in details, however unimportant."

Mr. Fairbrother then rang the bell.

"Will Nupkins know?" asked Claude curiously.

"Nupkins is unlikely to know," replied the master of Nupkins; "but my daughter, Felicity, is sure to know."

Nupkins appeared and was bidden to summon Mr. Fairbrother's youngest child.

"A remarkable man that," ventured Claude. "One of the distinguished, old family servants—a vanishing race."

"You appreciate him? I am glad you do," replied Mr. Fairbrother. "There is a rare, canine fidelity in Nupkins. He has intellect also—even a remote feeling for beauty. If he has a fault, it is that he thinks too much in terms of the moving pictures."

"Everybody does," replied Augustus. "Life is becoming far too cinematographic."

Felicity appeared, concealing her hidden excitement under an air of indifference.

"You want me, papa?" she asked.

"To settle a little question of fact, my dear. Is the griffin——"

Felicity stared at the object of her adoration.

"Not 'Mr. Griffin.' We are concerned with his heraldic decorations, not himself," explained

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her parent. "Is the fabulous creature who dances with the mock-turtle to be found in 'Alice in Wonderland,' or 'Alice Through the Looking-glass' ? That is the question exercising our minds."

"'Alice in Wonderland,'" said Felicity, and Mr. Fairbrother bowed to Augustus.

"I stand corrected," he said. "Thank you, my child."

Felicity could ill hide her disappointment.

"Is that all ?" she asked.

"All—for the present," replied Augustus, with a note of encouragement in his voice.

He opened the door, to allow her to depart, and she whispered a question.

"How are you getting on ?" she inquired.

"Merely open skirmishing so far ; but I'm hopeful," he replied.

VI

THE ERUDITION OF VERA

MEANTIME, Lord Mountracey, who was always happier when walking about than sitting down, had proceeded from the coat-of-arms to two etchings upon the walls of the library.

“Your far-famed collection of Norman castles doubtless, Mr. Fairbrother?” he asked.

“Yes—the castles. I have now acquired fourteen and am at present in treaty for three more. Do you know Lord Bolsover?”

“Well,” replied Claude.

“Then take occasion to tell him he’s asking too much for his ruin in Cumberland,” said Mr. Fairbrother. “I’ll give thirty thousand. It isn’t the best period and there’s very little of it. It has attractive features I grant; but thirty thousand is enough.”

“Generous surely,” said Augustus.

“He shall know,” promised Claude. “I hope Mountracey in Devonshire satisfies you?” he added. “A fine castle, Mr. Fairbrother?”

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"Don't take in a bad part; but it's not a fine castle at all, Lord Mountracey. To be honest with you, a miserable castle—a thoroughly bad, inefficient castle," replied his host.

The shadow of a blush flitted over the features of the peer.

"Sorry," he said.

"Interesting only as an example of Norman jerry-building at its worst," continued the expert remorselessly. "The work was scamped, the plan idiotic and the site ridiculous."

"The site is admitted to be one of the most beautiful in Devonshire," replied Claude rather stiffly.

"Laziness, not love of beauty accounts for it," continued Mr. Fairbrother. "Do you suppose your Norman ancestors cared about scenery? Believe me, no. Mountracey could have been stormed with a catapult and a hundred resolute men."

Claude brightened.

"Probably my people were so popular that they didn't fear assault," he suggested.

"Everybody, who was anybody, feared assault in those days," replied Mr. Fairbrother.

"And still does," added Augustus.

"A slovenly castle," continued the present owner. "Why, the kitchens are two hundred yards from the banqueting hall. They cer-

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tainly never had their soup hot, and boiling water must have been a practical impossibility."

"There indeed you are wrong," replied Claude.
"They must have had that for shaving."

"I much doubt if they did shave," declared Mr. Fairbrother, and again his guest ventured a contradiction.

"Yes, they shaved. I can prove it. We have well-kept tombs of the period. You'll find them in the parish church three miles off. Tombs of the Crusader Mountraceys—all clean shaved."

"But wait—wait a minute," cried Mr. Fairbrother, who loved a friendly argument. "Weren't the Crusades before the Conquest? If so, your assertion falls to the ground, as the Mountraceys only arrived with the Conqueror."

"True," admitted Claude. "When were the Crusades, old man?"

He turned to Mr. Griffin.

The latter pressed his hand to his head.

"I ought to know," he answered. "I do know—but, tut! it's slipped me for the moment."

"I cast no reflection, Lord Mountracey; yet there's nothing like certainty," repeated Mr. Fairbrother; and again he rang the bell.

"Will Nupkins know?" inquired Claude once more. Nupkins exercised a sort of fascination

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over him, which he was not psychologist enough to understand.

"If they have burlesqued the Crusades upon the films, Nupkins will know—not otherwise," replied his host. "But my daughter, Vera, is sure to know."

"What doesn't she know!" murmured Claude, somewhat to the surprise of his listener.

"Miss Fairbrother is amazingly accomplished," explained Claude, seeing a look of astonishment in her father's remarkable eye.

"She ought to be," said Mr. Fairbrother.

Nupkins was directed to send Vera to the library and Augustus filled a pause.

"They must be a genuine delight—these historic fragments," he remarked.

"A delight and a responsibility. I feel my obligation to the nation—too acutely if possible," replied Mr. Fairbrother.

"Yours is the privilege of both winning pleasure and doing the State some service," said Claude.

"Only the rich can have their cake and eat it too," remarked Augustus.

"Yet I sometimes think that nobody with a conscience ought to do that," said Claude.

Mr. Fairbrother approved this sentiment.

"You are only too right, young man. Indeed, probably no one with a really perfect conscience

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would be content to have a cake, or eat it either. The rich don't give away enough cake, Lord Mountracey."

"A great deal is being taken away from them, however," replied Claude.

Vera entered at this moment, calm and self-contained. She hoped nothing, for she had heard of Felicity's experience.

"A question of fact which has escaped our memories, my dear; the date of the Crusades," said her father,

Now the date of the Crusades was child's play to the elder Miss Fairbrother.

"There were seven," she replied without an effort. "The first, urged on by Peter the Hermit, began in one thousand and ninety-six and ended in eleven hundred."

"Bravo!" cried Augustus.

"The second," continued Vera, acknowledging his applause with a slight inclination, "started in eleven hundred and forty-seven——"

"We don't want the second," said Mr. Fairbrother.

He bowed to Claude.

"I stand corrected once more. You may go, Vera. I thank you," he remarked.

"Such learning is very impressive in one so young," said Augustus.

"Gratifying I admit," replied Mr. Fairbrother.

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Meantime Lord Mountracey had opened the door for Vera.

“How are you getting on?” she asked under her breath as she did so.

“We are feeling our way stealthily and hopefully,” he replied.

VII

JOSIAH FAIRBROTHER IS ADAMANT

“WELL,” said the old navy, “we have enjoyed a pleasant chat, gentlemen. It is good to find the younger generation interested in subjects that matter. I have a son who is also interested in subjects that matter, but unfortunately he permits “The Daily Herald” and “The Red Flag” to guide his youthful mind in all things. This is doubtfully wise and is tending to narrow his views. Journals that seek to destroy the Constitution, and only exist to belittle those who preserved this country by their genius from defeat at the hands of Germany, do not commend themselves to me. He is at that age when young men like to lecture, so he has gone to America to do so. They are very patient with youth in America. Joseph fought creditably in the war, as I hope you both did; but the result has been to create in him an intense dislike of the Allies, including England, a passionate regard for the proletariat, and absolute hatred for those who,

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under Providence, enabled us to achieve victory. Anybody who had any hand in winning the war is loathed by my son Joseph, and those who think as he does. And now to the Bronze."

Mr. Fairbrother approached the little safe beside the fire-place, took a key from his waist-coat pocket and opened it. The small but massive door turned upon invisible hinges and revealed a cabinet some fifteen inches high made of satin-wood.

The psychological moment had arrived.

"The historic island of Naxos, as you will recollect——" began Mr. Fairbrother; and then Augustus interrupted him.

"One moment, my dear sir! We have an exceedingly important private communication to make before we see the Bronze."

"Something that may be vital to all our interests and future happiness, dear Mr. Fairbrother," declared Lord Mountracey.

The listener restored his unopened cabinet to the safe and turned upon them with considerable annoyance.

"You've come about a Company!" he exclaimed.

"A Company of four," said Augustus.

"This is disappointing," returned the elder. "I judged you worthy of better things. More than once has my hospitality been abused by

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unprincipled men, who pretended an interest in archaic art, only to spring a rubbishy speculation upon my indignant ears. I might have guessed that a lord and a lawyer—sinister combination ! I wish you good evening, gentlemen.”

He went to the bell ; but Augustus stopped him.

“Wait, wait, wait, wait, dear Mr. Fairbrother ! You utterly mistake us. This is no rubbishy speculation, but a matter of human lives,” he cried.

“I have never lent my name to a Company and never shall,” said Claude.

“And I have never floated anything in my life except myself,” the Member of Parliament added. “We want to increase the sum of human happiness—an ambition for which you yourself are justly famed.”

“Real happiness can only consist in making others happy,” said Mr. Fairbrother.

“That’s what we feel ; and that’s what Miss Fairbrother and Miss Felicity Fairbrother also feel,” answered Lord Mountracey with conviction.

“By unspeakable good luck we met in London,” continued Augustus, before Mr. Fairbrother had time to speak.

“Providence, old man, not luck,” corrected Claude.

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"I said 'Providence,'" replied Augustus ; then he continued with the utmost speed.

"We met, and from that moment lived for each other—I, for your younger daughter ; Claude, for the elder. And our devotion is returned. We love them with the deepest, purest affection, Mr. Fairbrother, and they love us in the same absorbing manner."

"And a point to note is that not one of us has ever loved anybody before," said Claude.

"Yes ; that's an extraordinary feature. The fresh virgin passion of four——"

But Mr. Fairbrother had raised his hand for silence.

"I am human," he said, "and I have not forgotten what it is to be young ; yet for a thousand reasons the thing you propose is utterly and radically out of the question. It is, in fact, everlastingly impossible. Words fail me to create in your minds the magnitude of the impossibility. Nothing that a thousand barristers could plead would change my determination ; and if the ancestors of Lord Mountracey, from Norman times to the present, were all before me on their bended knees, my reply would still be in the negative. Had your lineage and profession been otherwise, there is no reason to suppose that success might not have crowned your suits ; for of course my girls must be married some day,

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and were their love proved to be such as you allege, then all might have ended well. But the unfortunate facts make my attitude final. The rooted convictions of a lifetime cannot be pulled up by four young people, even though they all pull together. In a word, no daughter of mine shall marry a peer if I can prevent it, or with one who practises the law. You are absolutely and irretrievably disqualified, gentlemen."

Mr. Fairbrother spoke slowly and with great dignity. His steadfast eyes did not waver from their faces, and when he was not regarding one he looked intently upon the other.

"This is shattering news," murmured the peer.

"I cannot believe my ears," declared Augustus. "There is something almost apocalyptic in your tone of voice, dear Mr. Fairbrother."

"As men I might like you," replied their elder calmly. "Indeed, I do like you. You are intelligent and courteous. But it is what you symbolise and actually represent that decides me. There is 'lawyer' written upon the countenance of your friend, Lord Mountracey, in characters as clear as those that grave long descent upon your own. Speaking, therefore, in a Pickwickian sense, I can only detest you both."

"Without prejudice?" asked Augustus.

"Without any prejudice whatever."

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"One might abandon the law," ventured Augustus.

"Too late," replied Mr. Fairbrother. "The barrister can no more abandon the intoxicating and poisonous delights of advocacy than the leopard can change his spots. Alas! lawyer and leopard have too much in common. And since we are speaking plainly——"

"Only you, dear sir," whispered Claude. Whereupon the parent of Vera and Felicity turned to him.

"I know men," he said, "and I can already see more than a barrister when I look at Mr. Griffin. He combines those gifts of physical health and good looks, charm, tact, opportunism and ostrich-like capacity for hard work, plus a touch of earthy genius, which only point to one place. He also will be a peer in process of time. The potential nobleman is revealed in him only too plainly."

"All without prejudice?" inquired Augustus. But well he knew that the secrets of his soul lay revealed; while Claude, even at such a moment, was unable to conceal a wan smile before this description of his companion.

"Then you would convey the impression that there is no hope for either of us?" said Lord Mountracey in hollow tones.

"Not a ray, my dear fellow; not a spark,"

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replied Mr. Fairbrother. Then, with a fatherly gesture, he patted their broad shoulders. "We will continue friends," he said. "I appreciate your amiable and pleasant qualities; but more than that must ever be impossible. Summon your fortitude and accept the inevitable like men."

"No chance through your maternal branch, Claude?" asked Augustus, whose forensic mind was moving through deep channels unseen.

"None, I fear," replied his friend. "My dear mother was a Featherstonhaugh of County Down. She descended from the ancient monarchs of Tyrone."

"Worse and worse—royal blood," said Mr. Fairbrother.

"But Irish kings were different from other kings," argued Augustus.

"Only as Irishmen are different from all other men. It is because we do not recognise and respect this fact that we are faced with the Irish Question," responded their host.

"No doubt, no doubt," said Claude.

"In tackling Ireland," proceeded Mr. Fairbrother, "we forget essential features of the problem. Life, for an Irishman, is never worth bearing unless he firmly believes it unbearable. Peace to him is the one state he will never suffer; and he never has. We must leave Ireland her

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grievances, but translate them into the imaginary, rather than the real."

"How would you begin?" asked Augustus, who was not really interested, but pursuing the thread of his own reflections and fencing for time.

"Fish-plates," said Mr. Fairbrother.

"More fish-plates?" inquired Claude.

"More and more, Lord Mountracey. Five thousand miles of new railways and Ireland would be so busy making money that she would have far less leisure for making mischief."

"You mistake the Irish character," declared his lordship. "Ireland's ideals are not material. She despises money."

"Nobody despises money after they have got it," interpolated Augustus. "Where are the rich Irishmen?"

"In England," replied Mr. Fairbrother. "And do they worry us?"

"Only Carson and Shaw," said Augustus. "Ulster is like Mrs. Micawber," he continued. "She never, never will desert John Bull. And he's rather like Mr. Micawber, isn't he?—always waiting for something to turn up."

"Ireland should be won by kindness," proceeded the older speaker. "Let them have their Republic. Insist upon it. Give it to them with drums and banners, *but not with subsidies*. Those

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cease naturally. Why do we fear? They are farther off than France, and we are going to make a tunnel to France. Let them have their Republic; and in a year's time they will be so hard up that they will pray to join us again, and call us monsters of iniquity and ingratitude for keeping them out. Educate—educate—educate! Lift the priest-ridden country above its tyranny of superstitions; enlarge its mind; free its soul!”

“They are an impatient people and resent any education,” explained Claude. “That’s why their reformers and prophets and artists come and live here. They know that we will stand anything; Ireland won’t. If their geniuses preached to Ireland, and laughed at her, and told her what they tell us, and showed her what a benighted fool she was, they’d get buckshot from behind. Here they get backsheesh to their faces.”

“And sometimes spit in our faces for it,” said Mr. Fairbrother.

“We are the only people on earth who pay for the pleasure of seeing ourselves as others see us,” answered Augustus.

“A mark of a great nation,” declared Mr. Fairbrother. “While Ireland tortures our heart,” he continued, “we must endeavour to fill her head and remember the fundamental difference of

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outlook. An Englishman, for example, never knows when he's beat ; an Irishman never knows when he's won. We must din it into them that they have won."

"Prosperity steadies our opinions quicker than anything," asserted the King's Counsel. "Take Socialism. It becomes merely an academic pose when a man has a banking account. We're only out for security for everybody else till we've got it for ourselves."

"Cynical, but true," admitted Mr. Fairbrother. "In my youth Labour was a sheep without a shepherd, as I felt very acutely, and, indeed, endeavoured to point out to my fellow-labourers. Now there are so many shepherds that Labour is almost too much shepherded to work at all. What with its unions and delegations, its deputations and its conferences, its plebiscites, its bath-times, its meal-times, its play-times, its rights and wrongs, its hearths and homes, its wives and children—how they make leisure to earn their money becomes daily a greater puzzle to me. But, of course, the result is inevitable : they don't. A man has only a certain amount of nervous energy, and if he translates it into thought, it's spent and can't go into physical work too. Brain and brawn both mean so much energy, and if a horse began to doubt whether his corn was as good as usual, by so much thinking

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he would lessen his horse-power. You see that ? ”

“ Clearly, Mr. Fairbrother,” admitted Claude.

“ And presently the servant problem will extend to the problem of Labour in general,” proceeded the navvy of old. “ We hear of labour-saving contrivances—labour-lessening in every direction. Why ? Because labour is no more natural to man than any other animal. We don’t like work until we have done a great deal of it and it becomes a silly habit ; so the tendency is to get our work done for us by other people if we possibly can. And now other people are beginning to weary of this arrangement, because their brains have been developed to a point above the beasts that perish. The reason for so much necessary work you will have remarked, no doubt. Simply that there are far too many people in the world—again the result of ignorance. Overcrowding makes mankind quarrelsome ; but the education of women tends directly and beneficently to decrease this overcrowding, and, when we banish war, the call for over-populating will disappear. Nor need we fear exhaustion of supplies in any case. We shall cease to cut coal, for example, long before we have finished it. Coal fires will burn in museums as a curiosity, and the sun and moon and earth will be harnessed to save us a prodigious amount of hateful labour by employing the

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forces running to waste in our heat supply and our water and soil. All this our descendants will do. They will let Nature work for them through machines, and confine their own physical labour to the agreeable tasks of enjoying life and taking athletic exercise for health's sake. The real work of mankind in the future is destined to be mental."

"You'd nationalise the mines, I expect?" asked Claude.

"I'd nationalise the miners—and everybody," replied Mr. Fairbrother. "I would lift the people out of their parochial selfishness and their party politics and make them see, if I could, that England is a bigger thing than the Fabian Society, and the British Empire a nobler institution than the I.L.P."

"Would you rob us of our 'intellectuals,' Mr. Fairbrother?" inquired Augustus, still in reality busy with his own thoughts and the subject that had brought him to Tunbridge Wells.

"I never trust anybody who despises England," replied the patriotic elder. "I loathe, above all, those men who live in England and on her, and, like nameless insects, repay for the blood they suck by leaving poison in the wound. You lawyers! You lock a man up for stealing a turnip; but you dare not touch the parasites, called 'intellectuals,' who steal English faith and pride in this country; who make the masses

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doubt if it is good to be an Englishman ; who tried to foul the young souls of those who went to fight for England ; whose words were echoed with applause in Germany, when we were faced with national death and destruction ; and whose public utterances to-day would bring Bolshevism to-morrow ; the rats who want to sink the ship and then hop to another ; the malicious apes whose sole pleasure is to twist the lion's tail, knowing well that the amiable, short-sighted brute will never lift his paw against them ! ”

“ It is a grand thing to be an Englishman,” admitted Lord Mountracey, while Mr. Fairbrother calmed down and breathed deeply.

“ But devilish expensive,” said Augustus. “ I should say it was impossible to be a typical representative of the dear old country under five thousand a year in present conditions.”

“ A costly privilege, no doubt ; but well worth the money,” declared Mr. Fairbrother.

“ The fittest alone survive ; that's a comforting thought for England,” answered Claude.

“ And we imagined we were the fittest to marry Vera and Felicity,” sighed Augustus.

“ So did they ; so did they,” muttered the peer.

Josiah Fairbrother did not take this use of Christian names in an unfriendly spirit.

“ Well,” he said, “ you all thought wrongly. Even the youngest of us sometimes make mis-

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takes. And now, if I may say so, it's more than time you both returned home."

"I suppose it is," replied Claude. "I feel as if I hadn't got any home, Mr. Fairbrother."

"I, too, have a beastly homeless sensation," added his friend.

The master of Orchard Dene rang the bell.

"You share my sincerest sympathy," he said. "I will direct them to bring up the car."

"I wonder," ventured Augustus, "whether you would permit us to break this tragedy to your daughters, dear Mr. Fairbrother? They have much to bear, I'm afraid; and they might bear it better from us than anybody."

Nupkins entered as he spoke and cast a suspicious glance at the open safe, for his master had not shut it when he returned the Venus of Naxos to her nook.

"Most certainly; most certainly," replied Mr. Fairbrother to the disconsolate suitors. "A natural and human thought. Ask the ladies to join us, Nupkins, and bring the whiskey and soda. Then direct Mr. Griffin's chauffeur to make ready. Let him also be refreshed."

Nupkins departed to obey and Mr. Fairbrother proceeded.

"From your own lips the blow may fall more lightly, no doubt; but I blame my daughters none the less. They knew the situation as you

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could not have known it, and were well aware that they contemplated an impossibility."

"Love made us all so absurdly sanguine," confessed Augustus.

"I can hardly trust myself to tell Vera," murmured Claude. He had grown pale under his poignant suffering.

"She'll know as soon as she looks at you, old man," said his friend sympathetically.

"The truth in as few words as possible," advised Mr. Fairbrother, his own voice trembling a little.

"There are times when only a fiend would tell the truth, my dear sir," replied Claude.

Then there entered Felicity, Vera, and their mother.

VIII

THE VENUS OF NAXOS APPEARS

“**T**HE verdict, papa !” cried Felicity in a voice of tense anxiety. But it was Augustus who replied.

“Penal servitude for life for us all,” he answered heavily.

“Papa !” exclaimed Vera, her tones vibrating with bitter disappointment.

“Sit down ; oblige me by being seated,” said Mr. Fairbrother. They obeyed, and fixed strained and searching glances upon his inscrutable face, while Nupkins brought in the whiskey and soda. Again the faithful fellow glanced uneasily at the open door of the safe and then withdrew.

“To regret impossibilities is vain,” began the parent of Vera and Felicity ; “and yet, candidly I am sorry for what appears to have happened. It is human to deplore the misfortunes of our fellow-creatures, even though we are powerless to ameliorate them. I am not really angry with anybody—far from it. I can easily see how my

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intelligent and high-minded Vera must have appealed to Claude—if I may call him ‘ Claude ’ ? ”

“ Please do—anything,” answered Lord Mount-racey.

“ While Felicity’s sparkling charm and unrestrained optimism may well have attracted such a man as Augustus—if I may call him ‘ Augustus ’ ? ”

“ Or ‘ Gussy,’ if you like,” replied the Member of Parliament.

“ I admire Augustus, too, with reservations,” continued Mr. Fairbrother, pouring out whiskey and soda for the visitors. “ But, as I have sufficiently explained, the obstacles are insuperable. We must recognise them and part with mutual respect and good-will.”

Vera and Felicity carried their refreshment to the guests, while Vera spoke with tears in her voice.

“ You have such an adaptable mind in most things, dear papa,” she sighed.

“ It is a mind incapable of illusion, Vera,” said Mrs. Fairbrother.

“ Even illusions are better than disillusion,” proceeded the engineer. “ And with young people disillusion is often only a matter of the briefest time. You must console yourselves with two reflections, that your engagements might have ended in very unhappy unions ; and,

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secondly, that the marriage laws of this country are so utterly disgusting and imbecile for both sexes that it becomes increasingly difficult for any self-respecting men and women to endure them. When we consider the present horrors of the situation and its mediæval indelicacies and preposterous regulations, we may reasonably ask ourselves why the House of Commons voted the necessary funds to appoint a Royal Commission and then utterly ignored the recommendations of that Commission. But I wander. What was I saying ? ”

“ That we will cherish our illusions and part before they are clouded.”

It was Mrs. Fairbrother who spoke, and Augustus answered.

“ Illusions are the ferment which turns the grape-juice of life into sparkling wine, dear Mrs. Fairbrother,” he ventured to say.

“ What a beautiful thought ! ” declared Felicity.

“ The dreamers are the only precious people,” continued Vera ; “ and the dreamer who makes his dream come true is the salt of the earth. Those are papa’s own words.”

“ Sublime reflection,” murmured Claude. He had been drinking deeply, and now dried his drooping moustache with a white silken pocket-handkerchief.

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"After all, truth is better than illusion, or disillusion," asserted Mrs. Fairbrother, and Augustus fastened on the remark, like a drowning man upon a straw.

"But what is truth, Mrs. Fairbrother? Merely another name for our own opinions. It is always possible that we may be mistaken."

"Ideas and ideals are far better than opinions," said Vera, and her father replied:

"A man must have something to support him at sixty-four, Vera. Ideals are wings for the young. Opinions are the support of middle age. Ideals reach me by every post. One might devote a daily cheque-book to ideals; but we must draw the line somewhere and try to keep our elderly feet on firm ground."

"Nothing is more undignified than a middle-aged person without opinions—nay, convictions," answered Mrs. Fairbrother.

Then, after a momentary silence, Lord Mount-racey spoke.

"A thought has struck me," he said.

"I'm sure you're always well worth listening to," replied Mr. Fairbrother with his usual courtesy.

"We haven't seen the Venus of Naxos."

"She ought to weep bronze tears for this," murmured Felicity. "She has been my mascotte till now."

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"We might invoke her," suggested Augustus, but Claude reproved him.

"Don't jest, old man, please," he said.

"I jest with death in my heart," responded the barrister, as Mr. Fairbrother fetched the Bronze. He took the cabinet from the safe, opened it and revealed an exquisite statuette. The figure stood ten inches high and the decoration upon her sinuous gown was of wrought silver. Her garment fell in beautiful folds; the lines were gracious and the face, with two little glittering, diamond eyes, of a delicate and delicious charm. One hand finely modelled held her robe; the other, unhappily, was missing.

The owner handed his treasure to Augustus who held it with becoming awe.

"Marvellous! Triumphant!" he exclaimed. "I've never seen anything like it."

"There is nothing like it," answered Mr. Fairbrother. "It is the most remarkable, archaic statuette known to exist."

"Weren't the women beautiful in those days?" asked Vera.

"And were not their clothes lovely?" added her sister.

"It is weirdly like you, Felicity," declared Augustus—"your mouth, your flashing eyes—if I may venture to say so. Such life was never

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in bronze before. It seems almost an irreverence to touch it."

Mr. Fairbrother admired his modesty.

"I often feel the same. The right hand, you observe, is lacking. Doubtless it held a lotus bud, or a lily flower. I suspect it to be a portrait. There is a dainty intimacy about the face. The work of the sixth century B.C., as you may be aware."

Claude was now regarding the Bronze, but without his friend's simulated enthusiasm.

"A charming little person," he admitted. "A jolly little girl—nice to live with. I suppose some lucky Greek did live with her—the original I mean."

He handed the statuette back to Felicity, and Augustus begged to see it again.

"It is astoundingly like you," he whispered once more to the lady of his choice. "Just that expression you put on when anybody asks you a question you don't choose to answer."

"The Bronze was discovered by navvies while excavating for the foundation of a Carnegie library," explained Josiah Fairbrother. "I always like to think that one of my old trade dug it up. I was in Naxos at the time and secured it. Greece has since demanded it back, but the country was contented with a monetary equivalent. The Venus of Naxos will not, I trust, ever leave England again."

THE BRONZE VENUS

"Papa loves it better than anything in the world except mamma," said Felicity.

"Will you have something more to drink before you leave us, Lord Mountracey?" inquired Mrs. Fairbrother.

"Indeed no, I thank you," he replied; but Vera pressed him.

"Do, Claude: it will make the parting a little longer," she said.

"In that case certainly—as many as you like, dear Vera," he answered.

Mr. Fairbrother poured out more refreshment and helped himself very sparingly. Felicity insisted on Augustus also drinking again.

"You need it to-night," she said, taking his empty glass.

"Make it pretty strong, papa," she added, and her father did so.

Felicity returned a few moments later and Augustus handed back the cabinet containing the Venus.

"It is a revelation of absolute beauty," he declared. "You have two revelations of absolute beauty under your roof, Mr. Fairbrother."

"Three, old chap," corrected Claude.

"I said four, old man," retorted Augustus, bowing to Mrs. Fairbrother, while Felicity restored the Bronze to its resting-place.

Mr. Fairbrother emptied his glass.

THE VENUS OF NAXOS APPEARS

"I drink fortune and prosperity to you both," he said. "My key, Felicity."

"Our saddest and happiest moments belong to the same hour," declared Augustus. "The Venus is unutterably great—as great as the sufferings we endure at this moment."

"The artist was a seer, as all artists should be," declared Mr. Fairbrother. "We go to art to widen our humanity, deepen our vision, purify our minds and increase our happiness."

"True, true," admitted Claude.

"Men and women are very insolent to artists," continued the owner of the Bronze. "I've heard the most common-place, ignorant persons say they didn't feel this, and they didn't see that, before a consummate work of art. As if it mattered a farthing piece what they saw, or felt. We go to art to cure our blindness and purge our gross imaginations: that's what it's for."

"I'll remember," promised Claude.

"I wish some artists would also remember," said Mr. Fairbrother. Then he held a hand to each. "Farewell, both of you. Good-bye, Claude; good-bye, Augustus. In happier circumstances we might have seen something of each other; and even now, when time has done its precious work—perhaps."

"You have gilded the pill with kindness and

THE BRONZE VENUS

patience," said Lord Mountracey, shaking Mr. Fairbrother's hand.

"Swallow it bravely then and go home, Lord Mountracey," begged Mrs. Fairbrother. "Tell Nupkins to call the car, Josiah."

"I will do so," replied her husband, and departed blowing his nose somewhat emotionally. For a moment oppressive silence fell upon the stricken circle.

IX

FAREWELL

“**M**AMMA, can nothing be done?”
asked Vera.

“Nothing, child. The mere fact that your father likes both Lord Mountracey and Mr. Griffin so well, and is still so firm, shows the case is hopeless.”

“You suggest no line of action for us?” asked Claude, as Vera helped him into his coat and opened his opera hat.

“None except to go away and live it down,” replied Mrs. Fairbrother kindly.

“I can go away and am about to do so,” he replied; “but I shall never live it down. I shan’t try—I won’t.”

“It is the case of an irresistible force striking an immovable object,” explained Augustus, while Felicity put him into his dust coat. “Our unconquerable will to be happy is opposed to your husband’s implacable determination that we shan’t be, Mrs. Fairbrother.”

“You’d much better not take it in that spirit,

THE BRONZE VENUS

Mr. Griffin," she replied. "My husband, though courteous and considerate to everybody, as you see, has always had his own way in everything since he invented the fish-plate, and always will."

"We do not presume to attack," answered the Barrister-at-Law, not without craft. "Our modest hope is that force of circumstances, and our future actions, may incline dear Mr. Fairbrother to change his opinions."

"Well put, Gussy," said Claude.

They took the hats that Felicity and Vera handed to them.

"We must trust the Venus of Naxos—Felicity's mascotte—to soften the heart of her father," said Augustus with an attempt at badinage.

"Hard-hearted little devil!" cried Felicity. "I shall always hate her now."

Mrs. Fairbrother corrected her younger daughter.

"Do not let grief make you forget you are a gentlewoman, Felicity," she said.

"Hope never dies," declared Claude, wiping a tear from Vera's face with his pocket-handkerchief. "Don't abandon hope, dear Vera. May I kiss her, Mrs. Fairbrother?"

The elder lady was growing uneasy.

"That's her affair. I wish you'd both go," she answered.

FAREWELL

Claude pressed his moustache to Vera's brow and Augustus spoke.

"Do your part, girls," he said. "Don't take this terrible and shattering stroke lying down. Be good daughters to your dear mother and father; but remember *us*. Let there be a steady, peaceful penetration in the home circle."

"Good!" ejaculated Lord Mountracey. "I, too, will peacefully penetrate. I know quite a lot of chaps with ruined castles."

"May I kiss Felicity, Mrs. Fairbrother?" inquired Augustus.

"Kiss her and go home, for goodness' sake," she replied.

Augustus availed himself of this permission, much to the amazement of Nupkins, who entered in the course of the salute.

"The car," was all he said, however.

"Farewell, but not a long farewell I hope," said Claude.

"*Au revoir!*" cried Augustus, and followed him from the library, while Nupkins brought up the rear.

Felicity and Vera turned to their mother with the woe of the world upon their beautiful faces; while Mrs. Fairbrother struggled between an emotion of relief and her deep parental affection. She took their hands.

THE BRONZE VENUS

“ ‘Life is real, life is earnest.’ Remember that you are Fairbrothers,” she said.

There came the melancholy, owl-like hooting of a motor horn.

“Gone!” said Felicity, flinging the pathos of a broken heart into the monosyllable.

“Something—something tells me we shall never see either of them again,” moaned Vera, little dreaming how soon, and under what appalling circumstances, her suspicions would be confounded.

“Better so, better so, my darlings,” replied Mrs. Fairbrother. “You must both—take—take up something useful.”

Nupkins returned and he appeared a little uneasy.

“Master’s waiting to say prayers,” he announced, and the ladies passed in single file before him. He arrested Felicity, however, and poured the suspicions of his acute but uneducated mind into her ear.

“Bronze all right, Miss?” he asked. “They’re just the sort to——”

She turned upon him passionately, not perhaps sorry to have an excuse for relieving her feelings.

“Don’t be an abject, grovelling, lunatic idiot, Nupkins!” she exclaimed, and then swept past him to prayers.

FAREWELL

Nupkins, to whom these ebullitions of a petulant temper were not unfamiliar, showed no resentment, but turned out the electric light and repaired to the dining-room.

It was Mr. Fairbrother's custom to end the evening orisons with a verse or two from "Hymns Ancient and Modern"; but on this occasion he omitted the melody, out of nice consideration for his disconsolate girls. Indeed he cut it short, so that they might press their sleepless pillows as quickly as possible.

"We must trust time, Sophy," he said, when Vera and Felicity, with but a perfunctory and damp caress, had left their parents.

"The one thing I never do trust," answered Mrs. Fairbrother.

And she was right, as usual.

X

THE VENUS OF NAXOS DISAPPEARS

IT was ten o'clock in the morning, and the library at Orchard Dene shone with the sunshine of a cloudless summer day. The French windows were thrown open ; flowers flashed in the garden ; bees hummed and the tireless fountain shot its silver spire into the air, where it broke in a shower of glittering drops and fell among the water-lilies beneath. All nature rejoiced in the fresh and sparkling purity of the hour ; but darkness dwelt upon the inmates of Josiah Fairbrother's mansion, for a fearful thing had happened. In the library were two persons. Sophia Fairbrother, worn and anxious, walked up and down restlessly, while Nupkins stood as though carved into stone. His attitude and appearance were impressive, for he was in his shirt-sleeves, he wore a green baize apron and he carried a long feather broom, holding it up upright, grounded upon the floor. Only his eyes moved and followed the figure of his mistress. The safe in the wall was wide open and the

THE VENUS OF NAXOS DISAPPEARS

satin-wood shrine of the Bronze, also open, stood upon the silver-table. But the Venus of Naxos did not appear. Indeed, it seemed too probable that she would never appear again.

Nupkins uttered a potent truth.

“As sure as you get hold of something nobody else in the world have got, you’re asking for trouble,” he said.

“Greed and dishonesty and envy are everywhere,” moaned Mrs. Fairbrother, who, for once, was distinctly unstrung.

“There’s some people so envious that they can’t see a worm on the ground without wishing they was a bird,” declared the butler. “I don’t want to rub it in, madam, and say, ‘I told you so,’ but——”

“You never liked them. You never trusted them. I saw it on your face, Nupkins.”

“‘Swell mobsmen’—that’s what they are called by the police,” he explained. “They move in the highest circles and often belong to the Upper Ten even. I’ve seen ’em scores of times on the pictures. In a respectable picture show they end by getting what they deserve. In real life they generally do not.”

“We shall never see the Bronze again,” prophesied Mrs. Fairbrother. “I only hope we shan’t fling good money after bad.”

“Yes, we shall—tons of it,” promised Nup-

THE BRONZE VENUS

kins. "Master will hunt to the ends of the earth for her and pour out a fortune."

"He has taken your description of their car to the police-station and had a long talk through the telephone with Scotland Yard," explained Mrs. Fairbrother. "Now he's gone off to have another long talk with Scotland Yard. It's aged him already."

"Thank God he'd took a good breakfast before the blow fell," said Nupkins.

"The Venus represented his life's reward ; it crowned his search for beauty," mused Sophia Fairbrother, as much to herself as the listener. "His passion for beauty was satisfied by me in my youth ; but only of a work of art can it be said that 'a thing of beauty is a joy for ever.'"

"It's a plague for ever if it's worth money," retorted the butler. He still stood like a warrior at attention, while his mistress restlessly roamed. "When you want things of beauty," he continued, "get 'em too big to steal and too tough to break."

"That was our idea with the Norman castles," sighed Mrs. Fairbrother.

"Now he'll be a miserable man for life," declared Nupkins drearily. "Haunted he'll be, all his born years, by them two blackguards in their wonderful waistcoats and shining shirts. Whited sepulchres ; and well I knew it. Master

THE VENUS OF NAXOS DISAPPEARS

looked at me with a proper despairing expression in his eyes afore he went out—hungry and doubtful—as if there was nobody left to trust. It cut me to the 'eart and I don't care who hears me say so."

"Your fancy, dear Nupkins," replied the lady. "You are agitated, like the rest of us. It's one of those dastardly, brilliant, infamous robberies you read about; and nobody's ever sorry when the rich are robbed. I've never cared twopence when I heard of wealthy women losing their diamonds, and now they won't care twopence for us. Of course, diamonds wouldn't have mattered—in fact nothing would have mattered but the Bronze."

"It's always what's took is the thing we can't do without," said Nupkins.

"To think," she murmured, "of those two men—their manners—their apparent refinement—their choice of language—the manly way in which they accepted their disappointment."

"No," said Nupkins, "they wasn't disappointed. All acting. Them first class criminals can give stage people any start and lose 'em every time."

The vision of a bent head in a Panama hat and two long legs cased in a suit of serge came slowly up a garden path. Then Mr. Fairbrother entered the French window. He was grey, haggard and very depressed, but calm.

THE BRONZE VENUS

"No news?" he asked.

"No news, Josiah," answered his wife. "Come and sit down and rest. You're looking dreadful."

"They wish to see me at Scotland Yard," he answered. "But it will be necessary to cross-examine Vera and Felicity before I go. Call them, Nupkins, if you please."

Nupkins obeyed, and when he was gone, Mrs. Fairbrother spoke.

"Poor Nupkins is feeling this acutely. He says that you looked at him with an expression implying that you had ceased to trust anybody—a despairing glance."

"I was despairing of humanity, not Nupkins," he replied. "I feel no hope. There are very disquieting features. This thing has been planned with fiendish ingenuity, Sophia. The Venus may already be on her way to America, or the Argentine. Indeed I have very little doubt that she is."

"Nupkins says they were 'swell mobsmen,'" explained Mrs. Fairbrother. "They are highly educated men, often gentlemen by birth, who deliberately choose a career of crime, while moving in the best society. He's seen them on the films."

"I wish they'd stopped on the films," said Mr. Fairbrother. He had aged ten years in one hour and a half.

THE VENUS OF NAXOS DISAPPEARS

At this moment Vera and Felicity entered together. They were crestfallen but daintily dressed. The elder wore rose and silver grey, while her sister was clad in white. Vera could not conceal her distress, but Felicity, though very pale, preserved a calm exterior and an open mind.

XI

THE CROSS-EXAMINATION

“YES, dearest papa?” began Vera.

“I wish to put a few questions to both of you,” replied her father. “Probably it doesn’t much matter how you reply to them; but we must leave no stone unturned. We must do our part. Think carefully before you answer in each case. You say the Mainwarings introduced you to these malefactors?”

“They were old friends of the Mainwarings. Claude——”

“Don’t call him ‘Claude,’ please,” cried Mrs. Fairbrother.

“What has happened is this,” proceeded her husband. “These swell mobsmen were clearly on the track of the Bronze. They seized the opportunity to get introduced to members of my family at a public ball. We have nothing to do with the real Lord Mountracey, or the authentic Augustus Griffin, but a brace of rogues who doubtless resembled, or made themselves up to represent, those characters and did so well enough to deceive

THE CROSS-EXAMINATION

the Mainwarings. Then they pretended affection for you and Felicity, approached me with this fable and, using inconceivable craft, abstracted the Bronze from the very centre of our family circle."

"But they *were* Claude and Augustus, papa," cried Vera. "It's beyond a shadow of doubt."

"How can you possibly prove that?" asked her mother.

"I can; I will," she returned. "'Country Life'? Three weeks ago there was a full page picture of Claude in his garden in Wales, standing by a wonderful plant that had done something out of the common."

She sought a pile of journals in a corner of the library, turned over the pages of "Country Life" and discovered the picture.

"There," she said, "could anybody on earth imitate Claude, and the way he stands with his chin in the air, like a camel?"

Mr. Fairbrother lifted his pince-nez, regarding the photographic reproduction and read aloud the legend beneath it.

"*Falconeriensis multicalyx simplicifolia major*, flowered for the first time in England" he repeated slowly.

"It doesn't mean that Claude has flowered for the first time," said Felicity.

Mrs. Fairbrother studied the picture.

THE BRONZE VENUS

"There can be no possible doubt that this was the man who visited us last night," she said with absolute decision.

"None whatever," admitted Josiah.

His younger daughter had also made search among the newspapers.

"I can show you Augustus, too," she told them.

"He was in fifty papers when he won his seat at the last General Election. Here he is. That's the best. Could there be a second face like that, mamma? Look at his wonderful brow—and his confident eyes."

Her parents studied the portrait of Augustus Griffin searchingly.

"No," confessed Mr. Fairbrother, lowering his glasses, "nobody could assume this cock-sure, yet most attractive countenance. Here is undoubtedly the person who was with us last night."

"Undoubtedly," added Mrs. Fairbrother.

"There you are then!" cried Felicity.

"Yes, there we are then, no doubt," replied her mother coldly; "but the fact remains that they stole the Bronze."

"Never, never!" vowed Vera. "If you only knew them as we do, you'd see how mad it is to think so."

"Father says 'be reasonable,' so let us be reasonable," began Felicity. "Ask yourself this,

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mamma. What had they to gain by doing such a horrible thing ? ”

“ There lies the mystery,” replied Mr. Fairbrother ; but his wife saw no mystery.

“ What they had to gain was the Bronze ; and they did gain it. What they will gain presently is another question. They may be the worst sort of thieves, or they may have done this on the spur of the moment, as a cowardly and base revenge for their disappointment. They can’t marry the girls, so they appropriate the Bronze. Yes, I believe that is the explanation. Now they’ll probably attempt some system of black-mail till your father gives way ; which I trust he will never do.”

“ That would be hopeful in one direction,” admitted Mr. Fairbrother, “ but depressing in another. If you read the case aright, Sophia, they were certainly not gentlemen and I have failed as a student of character. On the other hand, as they are now proved to be the veritable lord and lawyer, then we shall be able, no doubt, to lay them by the heels—unless they have already fled the country.”

“ Try to convince yourself they had nothing to do with it, papa,” urged Vera. “ It is not like you to be so quick to think evil.”

“ No,” replied her father. “ They had everything to do with it. That is as certain as night

THE BRONZE VENUS

follows day. The safe was locked when I came to take my usual half hour with the Bronze after breakfast. I opened it with my key and, on beholding the interior of the cabinet, what do I find? Not the Venus, but a silver scarab of the Third Dynasty from the silver-table. This had been deftly substituted to create the illusion of weight. One of you returned the cabinet to the safe last night, locked the safe and gave me my key. But by that time the Venus of Naxos was in the pocket of the peer or the lawyer—it matters not which.”

“Never, Claude! I’ll stake my life upon it,” said Vera, trembling with emotion.

“And never, never, never Augustus,” vowed Felicity, her face set.

“It matters not which,” repeated Mr. Fairbrother. “A daring and skilful achievement—probably the work of Mr. Griffin. And he shall pay for it. For once he shall assist at the hateful operations of the Law in a new and unfamiliar capacity. I show no mercy—none.”

“And meantime,” said Mrs. Fairbrother, after a pregnant pause, “life must go on. We have a large luncheon party to-day.”

“I shall make every effort to be back in time, Sophia. If it is impossible, you must make my apologies and explain the dreadful circumstances. Time is all important. My ‘Who’s Who,’ Vera.”

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Vera fetched the volume.

"Note their addresses," continued Mr. Fairbrother. "These can be telephoned through at once. Tell Nupkins I need the car at eleven o'clock for London. I may find the culprits already under arrest when I get there. I trust so."

Vera wrote the directions of Claude and Augustus and handed them to her father without comment.

"Thank you," he said, and Felicity made a suggestion.

"Shall we come with you, papa?" she asked.

"Certainly not," he replied. "I wonder that you can propose it."

Then he departed through the garden and Mrs. Fairbrother censured her younger daughter.

"Are you quite shameless, Felicity?" she inquired bitterly.

"We can trust our hearts, mamma," said Felicity gently.

"Yes, indeed we can, mamma," added Vera.

Their mother looked at them without love.

"I hope we can trust Scotland Yard," she replied somewhat harshly, and then left the room.

Waiting until they were alone, Felicity asked a startling question.

"Did you give papa the right directions?"

THE BRONZE VENUS

Vera stared, and a wave of colour suffused her forehead.

"Of course I did. How can you ask? They never took it."

"We say so," replied Felicity calmly; "but I'm beginning to think they did, Vera."

"Not Claude—I'm positive."

"No—not Claude," said Felicity.

"But Augustus never does anything for nothing—he told me so."

"Exactly. Gussy has got what he wants out of life so far; and now he wants me; and he's going to get me. Be cheerful and patient. I feel pretty positive that the gigantic brain of Augustus is at work. Perhaps we shall get a chance to help them when the real struggle begins."

But Vera was not heartened.

"I see no hope at all," she answered. "If they did do this mad and wicked thing, what was the good? It's gentle, forgiving people like papa who can be most merciless and resentful when they are thoroughly aroused. They'll forgive up to seven times seven; but the fiftieth time—never. Claude and Augustus will both be in prison to-night. But I'll wait for Claude if he gets ten years."

"Be sure that Augustus is not doing anything silly," replied Felicity. "He never has in his life, and why should he begin now, when the

THE CROSS-EXAMINATION

greatest thing in his life is involved? Papa generally respects motives."

"Very few self-made men take such a kindly view of human nature," asserted Vera. "He's too large-minded."

"So much the better," said her sister, and Vera continued.

"You speak of motives. What possible motive could excuse them if they took the Bronze?"

"I trust Gussy absolutely," returned the younger; "and if you loved Claude as I love Gussy, you'd trust him absolutely too."

Vera flushed once more.

"I love Claude as much as it is possible to love anybody," she answered. "You've no right to say that."

"Then let your love blossom into hope. Love's only a nuisance if it isn't hopeful," replied her sister.

"I trust Claude with my life," declared Vera, still a little warm; "but if you want to know the truth, Felicity, I do not wholly trust Augustus."

"Mean thing then!" cried the other. "I've always been loyal to Claude. I shall tell Gussy you don't trust him—I shall!"

"Tell him! Tell Gussy," answered Vera. "D'you think you'll ever see him again? I don't—not in this world."

THE BRONZE VENUS

As she spoke, Nupkins entered. He had cast aside the feather broom and apron.

“The person calling himself ‘Mr. Griffin,’” he said.

XII

MYSTERY AND HORROR

“**T**HANK Heaven!” cried Felicity.

“Oh, blessed Nupkins!”

“There ain’t nothing to write home about from the look of him, all the same, Miss,” replied the butler.

Then Vera’s heart spoke.

“Isn’t Lord Mountracey there too?” she asked.

“The swell mobsman calling himself ‘Lord Mountracey’ is not on the door step,” replied Nupkins.

“How does Mr. Griffin seem?” inquired Felicity. “Is all well with him? Does he look bright and cheerful and innocent?”

“He does not,” replied Nupkins. “He looks as if he’d spent the night in a mangle, Miss.”

Felicity, uttering an expression of dismay, left the room and Vera spoke.

“He is suffering, Nupkins?”

“In every limb seemingly, Miss. Pretty near got what he deserves by the look of him.”

THE BRONZE VENUS

"There is trouble in store I fear. Did he make any allusion to his friend?" asked Vera.

"No," replied Nupkins. "Only asked, in a voice like a new-born lamb, if he could see the master."

At this moment a truly horrifying spectacle met Vera's distracted gaze.

Felicity appeared supporting Augustus. The unfortunate man was lame; he carried one arm in a sling and he wore a surgical dressing over the right eye, while his face in addition had various patches and stars of black plaster upon it. He was perfectly clad in a grey frock-coat, a grey top-hat, beautiful grey trousers and a Cambridge blue tie. A Sherlock Holmes might have judged that Augustus had possibly started on a coach for the Derby, fallen off and been run over by several motor-cars. But this was not the case. For worse things had apparently befallen him.

"Oh, Gussy, Gussy, what have you been doing?" cried Felicity. She removed his hat, conducted him to the lounge and lowered him into it. He sank with a slight groan, but did not speak.

"Shall I stop, Miss?" inquired Nupkins; but Felicity bade him begone, whereupon he departed with sour glances at the sufferer.

"Who—who has been so unkind to you—

MYSTERY AND HORROR

“speak!” begged Felicity, and Augustus answered in a word. But it was a shattering word.

“Claude,” he said hollowly.

“Claude!” echoed Vera.

“Yes, Claude. I have, however, forgiven him—we must all forgive him, poor chap.”

“He never did all this without good reason,” said Vera sternly, and Felicity showed anger.

“Wretch!” she cried. “I always knew, with a hooked nose like Claude’s, that he was cruel.”

“Don’t call him names. Terrible things have happened to us both,” said Augustus in a weak and weary tone of voice. “But I expected them—I expected them. The course of true love never did run smooth and probably never will.”

“Where is Claude?” demanded Vera.

“I will tell you in a moment. Another cushion, Felicity. Under my left ear—thanks. I’m not sure yet if my neck isn’t broken. I shan’t be the same man again: you mustn’t expect it.”

“I’ll never forgive him, never. He’s ruined your expression,” said Felicity, on the brink of tears.

“And what did you do to Claude?” asked Vera coldly. “Claude is not the man to treat an old and valued friend in this way without some fearful provocation.”

THE BRONZE VENUS

"As a rule, no," admitted Augustus. "But the primitive savage will come to the surface sometimes. We all forget our truer selves occasionally. Your father, and only your father, need learn the particulars. This is no story for your ears, or Felicity's. But Claude must be forgiven. I insist on that."

"I have yet to learn there is anything to forgive," replied Vera.

"Can you look at Gussy and say so?" asked her sister.

But Vera was in a hard and suspicious temper.

"Where is the Venus of Naxos?" she inquired sternly.

"Safe," said Augustus.

"Where, Gussy? I will know."

"No, Vera, you will not," he replied, evidently hurt by her manner. "You oughtn't to bully me in my present condition."

"She shan't," declared Felicity.

"If you knew what Claude and I have gone through, you'd show sympathy, not suspicion," continued the sufferer.

"I should think so!" said his betrothed, and put her arms round his shoulders in a protecting attitude.

"Don't try to kiss me, child," begged Augustus.

MYSTERY AND HORROR

"I wasn't going to, dear," she answered :
"there's no room."

Vera was logical.

"If the Venus is safe and you are safe, then Claude ought to be safe," she declared.

"It doesn't follow at all," replied the Member of Parliament ; "and if you had any idea of what you had to thank me for, Vera——"

"Where is Claude ? I *will* know !" exclaimed Vera, whose passion was rising.

"Outside, concealed in my car," explained Augustus simply.

"How dare you leave him outside ? " she asked, flaming.

"For a very good reason and a very sad reason," replied Mr. Griffin.

Her colour faded. Indeed she became deathly pale.

"He's not—he's not dead ? " she faltered.

"There are worse things than death, Vera," he answered evasively ; but Vera stayed to hear no more. She ran like an antelope from the room.

"You at least trust me, Felicity ? " he asked.

"With my life," she replied, taking his unwounded hand.

"Extraordinary things have happened," he repeated, in a voice that made the truth of his assertion clear. "Human nature gets more and

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more puzzling as you grow older, Felicity. Only a child really understands it. To think that poor, honest Claude——”

“Tell me all.”

“Not for the world. Only Mr. Fairbrother must know. He has the pure, childlike attitude. He will understand the strange truth—the amazing psychology. The facts cannot fail to interest him profoundly, and doubtless influence him too.”

“As long as the Bronze is really all right,” began Felicity; but then Vera entered with Claude. He was unsupported, yet bore traces of extraordinary events. He wore a grey frock-coat and a grey top-hat, even as Augustus. One eye was badly blacked and he gazed somewhat wildly out of the monocle in the other. This, however, was not all. Lord Mountracey wore something else : a pair of handcuffs.

Vera had become almost hysterical.

“For mercy’s sake tell us what this means !” she entreated ; but Claude was not prepared to gratify her curiosity.

“You had better both run away and send Mr. Fairbrother as quickly as possible,” he said in a solemn voice. “I can only remind you, for the moment, that appearances are deceitful.”

“Appearances are a nightmare,” gasped Vera.

MYSTERY AND HORROR

"Reality is often a nightmare too," replied Augustus.

"Surely, if you love us, you can trust us?" implored Felicity. "What is your position, Claude? Are you under arrest? Has Augustus helped you to escape from justice? Shall we hide you in the tower wing and feed you by night? We will do anything—everything."

"No, no, Felicity. Claude has finished with subterfuge," replied Augustus.

"But we may, I think, promise you that things look less black than they seem," added his friend.

"Your eye couldn't," said Vera. "Will it ever be nice again?"

"We mustn't get too tragical," explained Claude. "We must first ask ourselves if I could possibly have done this."

"You!" cried Vera. "Never, never!"

"I warn you, old man, that anything you say may be used against you," murmured Augustus.

"Not by us," promised Felicity.

"The case lies in a nutshell," continued the broken Barrister-at-Law. "We must see Mr. Fairbrother instantly, and alone."

"You won't do that," replied Felicity. "He has promised mamma never to interview strangers again unless she is present."

THE BRONZE VENUS

"You can hardly call us strangers now," said Claude.

"Do you trust your mother, Felicity?" inquired Augustus.

"No girl ever trusts her mother," replied his betrothed.

"I wish she wasn't going to hear about it," said Lord Mountracey. "I don't want her to hear."

"Nor do I—in fact it's rather a blow," confessed his friend Augustus. "Can you manage to suppress her?"

"Papa and mamma will be just," declared Vera.

"I know; but we shall want rather more than justice—at least Claude will."

"You said it was going to be a clean peace, old man," murmured Claude.

"Of course; but there must be compromises," explained Augustus. "Compromise is vital to all human understanding. Civilisation is built on it. We all compromise now—with the world, the flesh, and the devil alike."

"You can remember this," said Felicity acutely; "dear papa has often admitted that he felt tempted himself when seeing exquisite specimens of archaic art in other people's collections."

"Good! That's a point," confessed Augustus.

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He appeared to be regaining a little strength in the radiant atmosphere of the girls.

"And we all know that it's quite as wicked to want a thing that doesn't belong to you, as to take it," added Claude.

"My darling, wicked Claude," throbbed Vera, becoming emotional once more.

The vision of a bent head in a Panama hat was observed by Felicity approaching from the garden.

"Here's papa coming over the grass," she announced.

"Leave us then ; he'd better not know we've seen you," advised Augustus. "And if you could only kidnap your mother and lock her up——"

"I will never forsake you, Claude," said Vera.

"Then I laugh at these manacles," answered the peer. Indeed he did laugh heartily and, as Vera and Felicity departed, Augustus checked his merriment somewhat sharply.

"Don't behave as though you'd come to a party, you fool !" he said. "Everything depends on you now—the psychology and all the rest of it. You must strike a note of dejection and shame, combined with a touch of recklessness and a soupçon of ferocity. Sit here. That's it. Head down—hands between knees. Rattle handcuffs now and then gently, and drop the eyeglass."

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It was too clear that both men designed to practise dissimulation, for Augustus had also assumed an appearance of unutterable dejection and despondency when Mr. Fairbrother appeared before them.

XIII

THE NARRATIVE

THE master of Orchard Dene was lost in amazement at the spectacle now presented to his eyes. For a moment he distrusted his senses, but the heavy breathing of Claude and the sighs of Augustus convinced him that he had to do with living persons.

After a pause he spoke in accents that testified to his amazement.

“Good powers ! What is the meaning of this?” he asked hoarsely.

“At last, dear sir,” said Augustus.

“At last, Mr. Fairbrother,” echoed Claude.

“Lord Mountracey in chains and you—you apparently a case for an ambulance ! There must be more in this than meets the eye,” said Josiah Fairbrother.

“Much, much more,” confessed Augustus.

“Where is the Venus of Naxos ? ”

“Safe—safe and sound, without a scratch. Feel not another moment’s anxiety on her account,” said Claude.

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"Thank heaven for that. Safe you say?"

"Absolutely as safe as though it were in this room," replied Augustus. "We come to tell you all, Mr. Fairbrother."

He regarded them with keen scrutiny.

"Do you wish me to send for the police, or a medical man?" he asked.

"For neither," responded Mr. Griffin. "Lord Mountracey, as you see, is incapable of further mischief, and I have already had my injuries attended to. We are here to explain everything and leave ourselves in your hands."

"The Bronze is safe—not on its way to America or the Argentine?"

"The Bronze has been deposited in my keeping," replied Augustus.

"Why?" inquired Mr. Fairbrother.

"I wished it; I begged Augustus to keep it," exclaimed Claude.

"*You* took it!" gasped the listener.

"Spare him and allow me to give you the whole pitiful and tragical narrative," begged Claude's friend. "The psychology will astound you."

Mr. Fairbrother rang the bell.

"I hate to think how often I have made you ring that bell," said Augustus; but Claude protested.

"There is no reason why Nupkins should hear

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the particulars. I don't want Nupkins to know," he said.

"Nupkins, I fear, read you far more correctly than I did," answered Mr. Fairbrother. "I do not ring that Nupkins may learn the facts, but that my wife may do so. I decline to listen to a word without the presence of Mrs. Fairbrother."

"I don't want her to know either," protested Claude. "It will prejudice your wife against me."

But the elder was in no yielding mood.

"It is either Mrs. Fairbrother or the police. You can take your choice," he replied.

"In that case I choose dear Mrs. Fairbrother," answered Claude, with a sinking heart. The heart of Augustus also sank; but he was an advocate with many triumphs to his credit. He strung himself to battle and his brain moved quickly beneath his surgical dressings.

The butler appeared.

"Tell your mistress to join me, Nupkins," said Mr. Fairbrother; "and then hasten, or send, to the constabulary and direct the Superintendent to telephone to Scotland Yard to suspend operations. The Bronze is safe."

"Where?" asked Nupkins, casting off the respect of a servitor to his employer.

"You do well to be suspicious, my poor fellow," remarked Augustus. "But have no fear. All is well with the Bronze."

THE BRONZE VENUS

“Why didn’t you bring it back then?” inquired Nupkins dourly; then Mr. Fairbrother restrained him.

“Do not argue, Nupkins,” he said. “Call Mrs. Fairbrother, and then go, or send, to the police-station.”

Nupkins so far forget himself as to glare and even snort at Augustus. Then he withdrew.

“It is one of those cases where truth is stranger than fiction,” began Augustus; but the owner of the Bronze cut him short.

“Reserve your remarks until my wife joins us, if you please. I shall listen without prejudice—you may be sure of that; and the more so, because I am personally involved. It is difficult to believe that anything you have got to say can palliate such an extraordinary crime.”

“It must be,” admitted Claude.

“And yet,” continued Augustus; “if I may prophesy, I believe your just anger will ripen into vivid interest and your interest awaken ultimate pity.”

Mrs. Fairbrother entered and both malcontents saluted her. She made no attempt to conceal her satisfaction.

“You’ve caught them, Josiah!” she exclaimed.

“No,” he answered, “I cannot honestly say I have caught them. They appear to have sur-

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rendered at discretion. They confess the theft and desire to make a statement."

"Where's the Bronze?" asked Mrs. Fairbrother.

"Safe in the keeping of Mr. Griffin," replied her husband.

"D'you call that 'safe'?" she asked with no little asperity.

"By a curious coincidence you echo the doubt of Nupkins," he replied. "But personally I feel none. They have given themselves into our hands. They are to some extent public characters, and in any case both are obviously powerless to do more evil."

"Only listen to Augustus," begged Lord Mountracey.

"Why should we listen to him—or you either?" snapped Mrs. Fairbrother.

"Common humanity demands it, Sophia," replied her husband. "Sit down. Perhaps you'd better lie down?" he added kindly, addressing Augustus.

"No—I can sit," replied the advocate.

"We are about to hear a statement—presumably of facts—and I heartily hope we may be able to accept those facts," said Mr. Fairbrother. "Listen without bias, Sophia, and don't let any skilful, professional appeal to sentiment cloud your judgment."

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"I shall not," she replied. "I never felt less sentimental in my life than this morning."

"In a word," began Augustus, when they were all seated, "Lord Mountracey stole the Bronze."

Claude groaned gently and Mrs. Fairbrother spoke.

"I don't believe it," she said.

"Why not?" asked the owner of the Venus.

"Once and for all, that's a lie," declared Mrs. Fairbrother.

Augustus was shaken, but he proceeded.

"I have been loyal to you, as these wounds ought to show. And my friend—yes, he is still my friend—has been disloyal. The psychology of his downfall is profoundly instructive and pathetic. In a fit of madness, a moment of overwhelming cupidity inspired by the magic of the Bronze, he determined—at the cost of tradition, honour, everything—to possess it. But now he is sane and in his right mind again—hence these handcuffs, which I put on at his own entreaty."

"As a guarantee of good faith," murmured Claude.

"You may say of his lordship," continued Augustus, "that he is both sinned against and sinning; that he is at once innocent and guilty. To the pure and systematically honest spirit, temptation, when it does come, appeals with shattering force—just as disease is most deadly

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to the healthy constitution. It sweeps the victim off his balance, devastates his moral instincts, makes him forget all that he learned at his mother's knee, breaks down every barrier until the dreadful deed is done. Dead to decency, honesty, conscience, and frenzied with desire for the Bronze, he seizes his opportunity. His mind, poisoned by this awful impulse, moves more quickly than it has ever moved before. He yields, and with the astute resources of a practised criminal, substitutes the silver scarab for the Bronze and secretes the Venus of Naxos on his person."

" 'How oft the sight of means to do ill deeds makes ill deeds done,' " mused Mr. Fairbrother.

"Do you believe this, Josiah?" asked his wife pointedly.

"We have not yet heard all," he answered; "but I frankly confess that I have felt these overwhelming impulses myself."

"They never did overwhelm you, however," she replied.

Then Augustus resumed the thread of his narrative.

"To have felt and conquered is to inspire pity for those who have felt and fallen," he declared. "The hand that could throw a stone, never does, Mrs. Fairbrother. Half-way back to London last night, after this appalling lapse, while I was bewailing your husband's ultimatum concerning

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Miss Fairbrother and her sister, Claude confided his horrible achievement. I nearly fell from my car when I heard it. He was still possessed by the evil spirit—full of unholy glee at his fancied triumph. His eyes glittered strangely. His very voice had changed. I mastered my own horror and pleaded with him—in vain.”

Lord Mountracey clinked his handcuffs gently while Augustus paused a moment. Then the speaker proceeded.

“I was determined not to lose sight of him, or the Bronze, and, on a pretence of discussing our bitter disappointment, begged him to put me up for the night. Suspecting nothing, he agreed to do so. I stopped with him and occupied his spare bedroom. Again I pleaded—again in vain. We retired at two o’clock, and an hour later I rose and prepared to recover the Bronze at any personal cost. I knew my danger, but did not shrink from it, for all our sakes. My purpose was, first to recover the Bronze, and secondly to save Lord Mountracey from himself. Thank Heaven I succeeded in both enterprises.”

“You’re not believing this, Josiah?” asked Mrs. Fairbrother coldly. But her husband was deeply interested. His eyes were fixed upon Augustus.

“Do not interrupt the narrative, my dear,” was all he replied.

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“Unfortunately for me,” continued Mr. Griffin, “Claude was awake when I stole into his apartment. Sleep refused to visit his pillow, and no wonder, for the Venus of Naxos was under it. As I crept in, he saw me, divined my purpose and was on me like a tiger ! We fought with the abandon of prehistoric man. It was horrible—horrible ! I need not describe the struggle. Indeed I could not. You have imagination : you can picture it. We are both powerful ; we were both resolute. Under ordinary circumstances Claude, who was the champion heavy-weight of the Coldstreamers in his day, would have destroyed me in that delirious moment ; but I had right on my side and I conquered, struck a blow directed rather by Providence than myself. With a terrific under-cut——”

“Upper-cut, old man,” sighed Claude.

“With a staggering and unexpected upper-cut I laid him senseless in his pyjamas—and recovered the Bronze !”

“Josiah, I ask you !” cried Mrs. Fairbrother.

“Look at them—Look at them !” he answered.

“You are right to wonder, dear Mrs. Fairbrother, but wrong to doubt,” proceeded Augustus. “One does not invent this sort of thing I assure you. If you want realism, go to the modern novels. Realism is only the bastard brother of

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reality. Reality you will always find romantic—all action and adventure—not only of the soul, but the body also. Now mark the amazing psychology. The moment Claude saw the Bronze safe in my hand he came to his senses and was a changed man. The evil spirit departed. You could almost hear its wings as it fluttered away ! Remorse—bitter, biting, blasting remorse struck my wretched friend like a tempest. He flung himself on his couch, face downwards, and sobbed like a little child ! ”

“ Josiah ! ” implored Mrs Fairbrother ; but her husband was deeply moved.

“ Poor devil—poor devil,” he said ; and Claude groaned and clanked. It was an affecting moment. Augustus himself showed emotion and his voice shook as he concluded.

“ Picture the scene. Claude, suddenly conscious that he had ruined his life, bewildered and aghast in the blaze of his own outraged conscience ; I, mangled almost out of recognition and bleeding at every pore, yet clutching the Venus of Naxos ! ”

“ It was quite unhurt you say ? ” asked Mr. Fairbrother.

“ Absolutely. My unhappy companion, now awakened to his enormities, brought me stimulant and rendered first aid to the best of his poor powers. He then clamoured to come here at once and restore the Bronze ; but I explained that

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it must be impossible to return to Orchard Dene until the morning."

"We should have been earlier than this; but they had to do such a lot to poor Gussy at the hospital," explained Lord Mountracey.

"Never mind me," replied Augustus. "I don't matter. My only regret is that we were not in time to spare you the shock of your fancied loss. But here we are at last—broken men—my health ruined, Claude's good name a thing of the past. My health matters not; but Lord Mountracey's good name—it's all he had; it's all he had!"

"I am, in fact, here for you to make or mar, Mr. Fairbrother," said Claude humbly, after a moment of tense silence.

The senior man was clearly agitated by this stirring narrative. Like many of his class, he concealed beneath a reserved and even suspicious exterior, a heart capable of the most ingenuous sentimentality. He had evidently been impressed by what he heard, and it must be owned that Augustus had imparted intense feeling to the recital and added many a dramatic touch and telling pause impossible to describe in words.

"An affecting story of human weakness and human greatness combined," said Mr. Fairbrother—"a glimpse of what we can sink to under the impulse of old, hereditary instincts, and what we

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can rise to at the stern voice of conscience and the trumpet call of duty. The man of long descent falls; his friend, regardless of great personal peril, redeems him and brings him back to his senses before it is too late."

"If you can say that, dear sir, we live again," said Augustus.

"You have both suffered in mind and person," continued Mr. Fairbrother; "but you may be said to emerge as conquerors from your dreadful ordeal. You—I can see that my wife wants to ask a question."

"More than one," replied Sophia, who had shown no shadow of softening. "Tell me this, please. Why didn't you bring back the Bronze?"

"At my wish Augustus kept it," explained Claude. "I couldn't be quite sure of myself. In fact I feared myself. I didn't dare to see the Bronze again. I had repented, but the horrible fascination of the Bronze—you understand."

"Yes, yes," said Mr. Fairbrother; "don't think any more about the Bronze. Put it out of your mind."

"I'm trying to," answered Lord Mountracey.

"So there it is—a page torn bleeding from real life," summed up Augustus. "I have fought and nearly fallen for you, Mr. Fairbrother; Claude has fallen altogether; but is it totally beyond your power to pick him up? With a man

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like Lord Mountracey it's never too late to mend."

"I've proved that over and over again," said Claude.

"A wonderful story; and what does it show if we look beneath the surface?" inquired Mr. Fairbrother.

"Are you asking me? Because——" began his wife; but he proceeded.

"It shows that not a drop, not a tincture of Norman blood can be trusted; it proves that Lord Mountracey has fallen a victim to his ancestral endowment. The old, predatory, hawk-like instinct, lulled under centuries of civilisation is there yet, lurking and alive, only needing stimulus and the opportunity to leap forth. But the valuable, reassuring fact would seem to be that he recognises it, admits it, confesses it. That is worthy of all admiration and shows a distinction of character one is glad to recognise. No, Augustus is right: Claude will never fall again."

"Never, never," promised Lord Mountracey.

"As for Mr. Griffin," continued the elder, "he has sacrificed himself on the altar of friendship. Who could do more? And who could have suffered more for doing it? For him, I confess, one has little but commendation, nay praise. Augustus has, in fact, pleasantly surprised me."

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"All is, however, lost if you cannot forgive Claude," asserted the barrister.

"Who am I to withhold pardon?" asked Josiah Fairbrother, his poetical eyes shining graciously. "These incidents, painful though they are, yet contain a tribute to our better and higher nature that is not lost on me. Providence may actually have planned them to show me my error in judging men too sharply by their profession and position, rather than themselves."

Mrs. Fairbrother felt that she was now getting out of hand. She knew that she must speak, or suffer a nerve storm which might do her harm. Augustus had long since noted, not without uneasiness, that her opinions did not coincide with those of her husband.

"We thank you," was all he said, and Mr. Fairbrother proceeded.

"Such events inspire the humble mind to a larger and more generous outlook on human nature. To a sensitive and, I hope, sympathetic spirit, they speak with no uncertain voice."

"I have known Claude since we were boys together," said Augustus. "There are grand traits in his character."

"To conquer the blood in our veins is a stupendous achievement," admitted Josiah.

"And Augustus—no words of mine can tell

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you what Augustus really is," declared Claude with conviction.

"Out of evil good may come, and I see the beginning of brighter and better times for you both," said Mr. Fairbrother kindly. "Perhaps, indeed, for all of us," he continued, approaching the bell. "I will send for the girls. They need only hear that my opinions may in course of future time be modified. The painful details can, however, be hidden."

"Please," said Claude.

Mr. Fairbrother's hand was already lifted to the bell when his wife, leaping to her feet, arrested him.

XIV

CLAUDE AND AUGUSTUS CRASH

"I WAS going to ask them to take something—they need it," explained Mr. Fairbrother. "Take something! Merciful goodness, haven't they taken enough?" asked his wife furiously, and the genial spirit of the hour was withered by the tempest of her evident annoyance.

"I thought you were too deeply moved to speak, Sophia," said her husband, and she admitted it.

"I was," she answered; "but now it's about time I did so."

"You are not seeing these events quite as I am?"

"No—I'm fairly sane still," she replied. "I've never heard such an impossible story in my life."

"Improbable—not impossible, dear Mrs. Fairbrother," explained Augustus. "Not impossible when you weigh the psychology."

"Doesn't it ring true?" inquired Claude, visibly disappointed.

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“ ‘ Ring true ’ ? It rings about as false as your black eye,” she retorted, returning for a moment, under the strain, to the simple speech of the class from which she had sprung. “ It’s a tissue of falsehoods. I never heard so many lies in my life before as I have the last ten minutes. You’re a pair of bare-faced swindlers ! ”

Mr. Fairbrother’s face clouded.

“ This is serious, gentlemen,” he said, “ for my wife is a shrewd student of character and I have seldom found her mistaken in her judgments.”

Then he turned to Sophia.

“ Where does the narrative strain your credulity, my dear ? ” he asked.

“ Man alive ! What’s come to you ? ” she exploded. “ Because you’ve got back your blessed Bronze—or think you have—you want to forgive them, and imagine they’re saints and heroes and martyrs and all the rest of it. You tell us to kiss and be friends, and call the girls, and bless everybody, and give your children away with half a million each, I suppose, to a pair of cold-blooded, hard-hearted rogues.”

“ You have utterly and wilfully missed the psychology, dear Mrs. Fairbrother,” repeated Augustus.

“ You be quiet,” she replied. “ We’ve heard enough of you. I haven’t missed the mendacity

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anyway. I'm talking to my husband now, not you, and I'm telling him that if I have another word of this tomfoolery, I'll go, and take my family with me. You ought to be locked up—all three of you—yes, you too, Josiah—in Colney Hatch! A pair of adventurers trying to bluff a lot of good-natured, innocent, simple people—that's what they are. And they'd have done it but for me."

"You are not going to believe us, Mrs. Fairbrother?" asked Claude sorrowfully.

"Believe you? I wouldn't believe a dog that had been brought up by either of you. You make my husband a laughing-stock—a man whose boots you are not worthy to black."

"We admit the boots," replied Augustus; "but upon our honour——"

Mr. Fairbrother had expressed every shade of doubt and confusion in his mobile features while his wife uttered these asperities. Now he interrupted the lawyer.

"If I thought there was anything in the nature of an intrigue here——" he began.

"Then do think—do begin to think," cried Sophia. "You've got a marvellous brain; don't let a pair of rascals paralyse it."

"You are strangely positive," said Mr. Fairbrother.

"Who wouldn't be? Go back in the car with

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them, and take Nupkins, and don't lose sight of them till you've got the Bronze. Get the Bronze—that's what you've got to do! Don't you see that, while they are telling these lies, the Bronze——?"

"May be on its way to America, or the Argentine," murmured Mr. Fairbrother, with re-awakened anxiety.

"Look at their faces," she said. "They know the game's up. Get the Bronze, and then give them in charge, and see how this outrage sounds in a police court."

"Cruel Mrs. Fairbrother," sighed Lord Mountracey.

"One word——" began Augustus.

But Mr. Fairbrother desired to speak himself.

"No, Mr. Griffin," he replied. "You have stated your case at length and received an ample hearing. It is only too clear that my wife does not believe you, and I am not going to deny that her arguments have some force."

"Don't go back on your truer self, Mr. Fairbrother," begged Augustus.

"There are times when common sense prompts us to go back on ourselves," replied the other; "and this may possibly be one of them. I hope heartily that my wife is wrong; but it is idle to deny that she may be right. I do not say that I take her side; but I cannot pretend to take

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yours so completely as I did. I am not prepared to contradict you as flatly as Mrs. Fairbrother has done ; but for the present I withdraw my friendship and applause. I keep an open mind ; but it was clearly premature to praise either of you. For the present the Bronze alone matters ; and to show I trust you up to a point, I will give you four hours to go and return with the Venus."

"That, of course, we will do," replied Augustus, "but that you should withdraw your friendship is a more bitter blow to me than any I suffered last night. Must you go as far as that? Are you not letting dear Mrs. Fairbrother's feminine impulses upset your more stable and masculine conclusions?"

This was a grave error of tactics, and Claude, though not so clever as Augustus, knew it.

Mrs. Fairbrother instantly responded.

"And these men, who insult me before your face, you would allow to marry your daughters!" she exclaimed passionately.

"Strange, if they are all you say they are, that they should believe in marriage at all," answered her husband.

Glad to change the subject and hopeful to modify the lady's rancour, Mr. Griffin spoke.

"Speaking generally I do not," he declared. "Life has become so complicated that marriage

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will soon have to be overhauled and set upon entirely new foundations. At present it is in danger of falling between two stools—the religious and the legal. People cannot even agree as to what marriage really is—let alone what it should be. But for Felicity and myself I believe in the good old institution heart and soul. It would have lasted our time. We might even have put new life into it.”

“I believe in marriage for everybody,” said Claude.

“Marriage is under-rated,” Mr. Fairbrother assured them. “But it demands certain gifts that are growing more and more rare.”

“Probably it is an acquired taste for this generation,” ventured Augustus.

“Men and women are generally too much, or too little married,” explained Mr. Fairbrother. “Few develop a genius for the happy medium.”

“Wonderfully true,” admitted Augustus. “In the case of over-marriage, the pair grow too centrifugal—too much like potted salmon and shrimp: they even lose their identity in extreme examples; while with under-marriage, which is far more common, the wedded couple become centripetal—they fly apart and are too often caught in the arms of other people. But Felicity is born to be happily, triumphantly married in the grand old way—to me.”

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“And Vera—to me,” added Lord Mount-racey.

“After which, if you’ve heard enough of this unspeakable pair,” said Mrs. Fairbrother, “you’d better tell them to be off. I do beg you, however, even if you’re still mad enough to believe them, that you will let Nupkins go for the Bronze if you won’t yourself.”

Upon this point, however, her husband was firm, with the obstinacy of a kindly man slow to think evil.

“In any case they are both well known and cannot evade me,” he replied; “but I prefer not to dwell on that. In four hours they will return with the Bronze, Sophia.”

At this moment Vera and her sister entered the room together. They were attired in fascinating gowns for the pending luncheon party; but their faces naturally reflected nothing but acute anxiety and alarm.

XV

THE VENUS RE-APPEARS

“**W**E can bear this suspense no longer, papa,” said Vera. “We must have the truth.”

“You’ve come to quite the wrong place for that,” replied Mrs. Fairbrother.

“Our hearts are breaking, mamma,” continued Vera. “It is impossible to tell you what this means to Felicity and me.”

“I’m sorry for you both. Indeed I am sorry for us all,” said her father. “I had hoped great things from Mr. Griffin’s ungarbled narrative: indeed it looked as though we had struggled from darkness into light. But all still remains doubtful. I am partially unconvinced, though with every desire to believe the best. Your mother—not for the first time—has dashed my incurable optimism.”

Mr. Fairbrother allowed the faintest tinge of resentment to colour his last sentence.

“Why should mamma be right and Augustus wrong?” inquired Felicity at a venture.

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"That is no question for you to ask," replied Mr. Fairbrother sternly. "In your mother's opinion we were nearly the victims of an unheard-of imposition. She takes the gravest possible view of the situation and while I—however, I say no more. Let the Bronze be in my hands in four hours. And on this occasion see that your farewells are speedy. You will also regard them as final. Much must happen and various incontestable proofs be forthcoming to substantiate your story before I consent to reopen the subject with either of you."

"I have shown your father the naked truth and there need be no farewells," said Mrs. Fairbrother.

"Nietzsche says that Art is with us, that we shall not perish from too much truth, dear Mrs. Fairbrother," argued Augustus meekly.

"And my wife is with us that we shall not perish from too little, Mr. Griffin," replied Mr. Fairbrother sternly.

His wife, vexed almost beyond measure, had already hurried from the library, and again admonishing Felicity and Vera to be brief, the troubled millionaire followed her.

There was a pregnant pause. One could hear the Louis Quatorze clock ticking on the Stevens mantelpiece.

"You've messed it up then?" said Felicity, striking to the bitter root of the matter.

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"We didn't. It was your mother," responded Lord Mountracey wearily. "Mr. Fairbrother forgave us the moment he knew that the Bronze was all right. You know how you do forgive people in moments of exhilaration—and are often jolly sorry afterwards that you have."

Augustus permitted himself a human weakness.

"I hate your mother—I loathe her," he hissed between his teeth.

"How dare you, Augustus!" cried Vera.

"All our care and thought and invention thrown to the winds," he answered bitterly.

"And all Gussy's psychology," added Claude.

"Your father understood perfectly. He has imagination and a heart; but your mother—were it not for your mother, you might be in Claude's arms at this moment, Vera."

"You can't go into the arms of a handcuffed man," said Vera, rather coldly.

"More you can. Take the beastly things off, Gussy," replied Claude. "I'm sick of them. They're no good now."

Augustus handed a little key to Vera and her betrothed directed her operations. In a moment he was free; but she declined the proffered embrace. As for Augustus, to the amazement of Felicity, he removed the shade from his eye, took his arm out of its sling, and strode, with his old, easy tiger-like stride, up and down the library.

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"You're not hurt!" cried Felicity.

"I am—mortally hurt," he answered. "My pride is in the dust!"

"And you didn't steal the Bronze, Claude?" asked Vera breathlessly.

"Is it the sort of thing I should be likely to do, even if I could?" he asked.

"I felt all the time it was Gussy who got away with it," declared Vera's younger sister. "But why—what on earth for?"

"The past is past," replied Augustus. "We needn't waste a minute with the past, especially as it has been so damned unpleasant. We must tackle the future now."

"Good Gussy!" said Claude. "If at first one doesn't succeed, one tries again, Vera."

"Be honest then," she said. "Be honest about it. You didn't deserve to succeed if you've been trying to deceive my parents."

"Pardon me: we thoroughly deserved to succeed. I won't have that," answered Augustus warmly. "And if your mother was half as clever as she thinks she is, we should have succeeded. My plot gave her credit for a psychological sensibility and an insight that she doesn't possess."

He strolled apart and continued his grievances to Felicity, while Vera spoke with his lordship.

"Is that dreadful eye real, or false?" she asked.

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"Romance," admitted Claude, whereupon, dipping her handkerchief in a rose bowl, Vera sought to remove the stain. She only made matters worse, however.

"Never again," promised Claude, "will I be a party to anything of this sort. It doesn't become me; it doesn't suit my style, or my position."

"Of course it doesn't, dear," she answered.

"I have my faults—nature hates perfection," he continued, and his betrothed sighed and uttered a homely truth.

"It's what she puts into us seems to make all the trouble—not what she leaves out," said Vera.

"I wish she'd left one thing out of me," he answered.

"What, Claude?" asked Felicity, returning.

"My infantile trust in Augustus," he replied gloomily.

"If you'd both trusted in us and not in yourselves, this might have ended differently," declared Felicity. "It was folly to try and do such a thing without us. One would have thought you knew better."

"By Jove! I shouldn't wonder if you are right," answered Lord Mountracey.

"I kept hearing a voice saying, 'Claude is a fraud,' and it nearly killed me," confessed Vera.

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"I'll go dead straight in future," he promised ; but Augustus doubted the possibility.

"This is no moment for good resolutions," he asserted. "We must decide on a new plan of campaign and that instantly."

"You have to win back mamma's regard," said Vera.

"And she has to win back mine," he replied.

"Is there any way to live down the past ? That seems the question," suggested Claude.

"Yes," replied Felicity. "By going one better in the future. But if you and Vera intend to be conscientious at a critical moment like this, Claude, then we shall only fail again."

"We mustn't fail again," declared Augustus firmly. "To fail once was human ; to fail twice would rob us of our self-respect. You can repent if necessary after we have succeeded, Claude. It is always easy to repent after you have succeeded."

"But to repent after you have failed, Claude, would be cowardly," added his future sister-in-law. "I'm sure your ancestors never did that."

"The point is not what we've done, but why we've done it," explained Augustus. "You girls of course appreciate our motives ; your mother—woman like——"

"Do leave mamma alone," protested Vera.

"I will say this for her," answered Claude.

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"She never believed for an instant I took the Bronze. Truth always prevails, Gussy."

"You're not a lawyer," replied his friend, "or you'd not commit yourself to such nonsense. We've tried the Venus and she's let us down; now we must develop new tactics."

"Without any psychology," begged Claude. "One has heard," he continued, "that honesty is the best policy. These old sayings often have a pinch of truth in them. Probably the only way to conquer Mrs. Fairbrother is to go dead straight."

"No, it isn't," answered Felicity. "The only way to conquer mamma is to be cleverer than mamma."

"Well, I'm not," admitted Claude.

"But Gussy is," she replied.

"I must certainly measure swords with Mrs. Fairbrother once more," declared the Barrister. "And this time it will be a fight to the death. I feel it. I know it. But, of course, if Claude and Vera agree with Vera's mother that they oughtn't to be married, that lets them out and simplifies the situation for Felicity and myself."

"We don't—we don't for a moment," pleaded Vera. "We want to trust you, Augustus."

"Claude can't run with the hare and hunt with the hounds," said Felicity. "If he still wishes

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to marry you, Vera, he must fight for you, as Gussy is going to fight for me."

"Claude can't pretend," said Vera.

"Humbug. Claude has got to pretend every day of his life—like everybody else," answered her sister scornfully.

"I can pretend; but not easily and naturally, like Gussy," explained Claude.

"Whatever happens, I won't live without honour," said Vera.

"And I won't live without Augustus," replied Felicity.

"Would you have him love you better than honour, Felicity?" cried her horrified sister.

"Certainly. Why should I be second to anything?" she replied.

"That's what I call love," declared Augustus.

"You're a wretched pair then," replied Vera coldly.

"Don't quarrel. There's not time," begged Lord Mountracey. "I'll do anything in reason, of course."

"That's all we ask," answered Augustus. "We are quibbling on the brink of a volcano."

"I'm positive that truth alone will save us," reiterated Vera.

"It may. Truth is never so effective as in the mouth of an utterly untruthful person," confessed Augustus.

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"Well may papa hate lawyers!" she exclaimed.

"It isn't the lawyers that aren't straight; it's the clients who are so confoundedly crooked," replied Mr. Griffin. "Once a man goes to law, he throws over every decent instinct. The clients tempt us."

"Do get on, Gussy," urged Claude.

"What is human conduct?" pursued his friend. "Merely reaction to stimulus. Claude reacts to Vera; I react to you. You both react to us; but if Vera is going to react to Mrs. Fairbrother instead of Claude——"

"I insist on no more deception, so does Claude," answered Vera.

"My dear child, life is deception," replied the lawyer impatiently. "We deceive everybody and everybody deceives us. Civilisation itself is deception. You can't have human society without it. Only rabbits and guinea-pigs scorn deception; but you must move on a higher plane than a guinea-pig if you want Claude."

"Let us at least try the naked truth," implored Vera.

"Nudity has no place in any social order," responded Augustus. "It soon may have—among the best people; but the fig-leaf has not yet fallen."

"It is better to be tactful than truthful," alleged Miss Fairbrother the younger. "Untruth

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is the first law of self-preservation. Even beetles and butterflies pretend to be something else. It helps them to get on. That's a scientific fact."

"The right to lie can be denied to no honest man," added Augustus. "Schopenhauer permits a lie in self-defence. But if we defend ourselves, why not those who are dearer to us than ourselves?"

"Good, Gussy."

It was Claude who spoke.

"Would you let an abstract idea come between you and the massive reality of Claude, Vera?" asked Augustus. "Would you banish romance off the earth? You cannot. It is, in fact, lying, not loving, that makes the world go round. Felicity understands this better than you. Let us listen to Felicity."

"I'm no good without my mascotte," she replied; "if you'd brought back the Bronze instead of talking about it——"

"I hoped to have produced it at the psychological moment," answered Augustus. "In fact I was just about to do so, when your mother flung our deeply laid plans into chaos. However, if you want the little wretch, here she is."

He dived into the inner pocket of his frock-coat and produced the archaic miracle.

Felicity took the Venus of Naxos from his hand and shook her head at it.

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"You naughty darling," she said. Then she went to a corner of the room, set the Bronze before her and concentrated upon it.

"I remind you, Augustus, that papa insists on having it back this afternoon," said Vera.

"Don't fidget about details," he answered. "Mr. Fairbrother's suggestion may not be convenient now."

Felicity stared intently at the work of art. Her chin was on her hands, her white forehead puckered slightly. She appeared to be more or less hypnotized.

"Try and think of something splendid and honest," said Vera.

"Don't put her off her stroke. It's quite enough if she can think of anything possible," retorted Augustus grimly. He turned to Claude and drew him apart.

"Dream of Vera—only of Vera," he said, "of big game shooting with Vera—of gardening with Vera—of home life and society with Vera—of the sons and daughters of Vera! Keep these bright visions before your eyes, and don't let this sudden and ill-timed enthusiasm for rectitude blur her gracious image."

Then the tempter turned to Mr. Fairbrother's elder daughter.

"I'm telling dear old Claude that you can't have omelettes without breaking eggs; and that

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he probably can't win you without breaking a few old, family traditions. But what are family traditions to——?"

"Hush! You're disturbing Felicity," said Claude.

For some moments silence reigned. So still was it that the sound of the fountain from the garden came to their ears with the mellow fluting of a Dartford warbler.

Then Felicity leapt to her feet.

"I believe I've got it!" she cried.

"I knew you would—given a free hand," declared her love of a life.

"I must speak to Augustus alone in the garden," she said.

"I object to that," answered Claude. "I know, only too well, the sort of things you'll say to Gussy alone in the garden."

"Quite right, Claude. They mustn't be left alone for a moment," added Vera.

"The Venus has spoken," said Felicity. "And she's not only doing this for Augustus and me. She wants to help us all. The supreme difficulty is with mamma."

"Ah! She sees that?" asked Claude.

"She does. Mamma is much too clever to be deluded by the truth—therefore—— Come, Augustus."

In a moment they had vanished to the cool

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recesses of a rhododendron glade, luxuriantly furnished with trusses of pink and white blossom ; while Claude regarded Vera with profound uneasiness. She turned impatiently to follow the retreating figures with her eyes, and as she did so, Claude, inspired by a flash of the old Adam, from which even he was not entirely free, regained the Bronze and slipped it into his pocket.

XVI

DOUBT AND DARKNESS

WITHOUT a measure of psychology, no account of real life and living people can satisfy the serious reader ; and though a Mrs. Fairbrother proceeds upon her way without it, larger minds will not be contented to do so. Indeed, since Dr. Freud arose, with his thrice blessed machinery of psycho-analysis, no well ordered narration should lack it. He wrote, indeed, for medical men, and though as a branch of medicine psycho-analysis has not yet emptied the hospitals, for the artist it undoubtedly comes as a blessing and a boon. That Shakespeare, Meredith and other celebrities should have struggled on without Professor Freud can only fill the mind with wonder ; but our rising and shooting stars of the Georgian firmament glitter already with his gracious illumination and find him a very present help in time of trouble. The heroes and heroines who used to do most of the work themselves, and move and speak and live and suffer and rejoice under our

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eyes, are beginning to be as archaic as the Venus of Naxos. Our modern protagonists prefer to lurk in secluded corners, doing nothing in particular, while their creators psycho-analyse them with such mastery that little is finally left but the clothes on their backs. The patient sufferers wilt away and drop their petals of character and purpose like withered flowers, till their souls are revealed without a shadow to cover their nakedness. Then the reader gasps with joy, neither knowing nor caring whether these distempered and peccant beings ever really had any bodies to bother about.

It is a noble advance, and as easy as falling off a log ; for given the dichotomy of a dual being, the veriest duffer can start the conflict, always remembering that the more involved, ungrammatical, obscure and murky his analysis, the more impressive and profound it will echo in the lay ear. No oracle worthy the name would sink to be luminous : that ingenuous art may be left with the by-gones who knew not Freud or Jung.

To-day we must before all things remember that we possess a number of inherited impulses which the conditions of life do not permit us to gratify impartially ; but we must also blush to admit that when these impulses do break loose, the result is often quite delightful and occasions great relief, both to the heart and soul of man and

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woman. Every one of us is in fact always chasing a criminal. As a rule nice people contrive to catch him ; but sometimes he escapes even the best of us for a season ; and it is idle to pretend that this evasion may not be attended by exceedingly pleasant phenomena. Freud, by the way derives everything we attempt, desire and accomplish from our disreputable beginnings ; and there must be something exceedingly true in that ; for consider the nature of even our present ambitions and the appalling things we still strive to attain.

The soul of Vera may be dismissed in a few psycho-analytical paragraphs. It looked out of her radiant blue eyes for everybody to see. Not so, of course, her dual personality. She was the daughter of her father and reflected his transparent honesty and steadfast trust in human nature. She shared his enthusiasm for art also, while winning, as did both her parents, all the spiritual sustenance she needed from the principles and practice of the Church of England.

She was happy, contented and intelligent. She had been highly educated and yet unspoiled ; and she had looked forward, healthily and in simple faith, to the day when she would fall in love and find the fair fabric of her innocent life crowned and glorified by that supreme experience. Then came Claude ; and if he had come alone, it is certain that Vera's dual personality would not

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have emerged from the secret arcanum in her heart, where until now it had lurked and languished quite unsuspected by her. Claude, however, proved more or less complicated, not indeed in himself, but by the influence of another; and the animal magnetism, or whatever it was, of Augustus, could not fail to affect the emotions which Vera experienced for Claude. She was, however, scrupulously just in this matter and recognised that fate might have parted her once and for ever from Claude, but for the baser personality and accomplishments of the Barrister-at-Law. A sinister but quickening gleam had now roused her dual personality from its slumbers, and after the custom of these second selves, it promised to make up for lost time. It may be said to have sprung a leak and threatened, sooner or later, to submerge Vera's higher self in its doubtful and dangerous flood.

Vera loved Claude with that simple adoration and abandon inevitable when such a heart as hers was lost; and there is no doubt that her standards, though nobly she strove to support them, were suffering a general assault. They did not crumble, but that calenture of spirit under which she now palpitated, seemed to obscure for a time the clean contours of her moral principles. Her dual personality, rightly guessing that such a chance was not likely to occur again, left no stone unturned to

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conquer. Even love, however, was powerless to stifle the conscience of Vera. The still small voice sounded ; but it was not long before she took the receiver off the hook, so to speak, at the prompting of an impulse, even deeper than that of conscience, which whispered that life without Claude might resolve itself, not into mere futility—that she could have supported—but into the actual disaster of bad conduct and the doing of wrong. This, of course, was her horrid, dual personality disguised as an angel of light—its favourite impersonation ; and presently it succeeded in convincing Vera that to do a great right, she had better endure a little of the other thing ; and the more easily, because the other thing would not actually be done by her. For her own future usefulness and justification, she now felt it vital to win Claude. She put it in that way to the tribunal ; and when the inner monitor, with a mighty effort, succeeded in side-slipping her dual personality, Vera was still able to keep up the argument. For, when conscience said that life built on a subterfuge must sooner or later fall in ruins from such hollow foundations, she countered smartly and explained to the sure guide that neither man nor woman can, or ought, to live for himself, or herself alone. Vera saw that conscience not only makes us cowards, but also abominably selfish ; and as an enthusiast for

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ethics, she felt that she must watch conscience rather sharply in this matter.

For Claude was now practically in her keeping—to make or mar. Thus she argued, deluded by her masquerading second self. Lord Mountracey had made a mighty effort on her behalf, and this seemed hardly a time to take her stand above him on a chilly pedestal of moral principles. If she did not marry him now, Claude would be irretrievably ruined—of that she felt assured. Vera herself was, of course, deeply read in Freud, and having long since applied the psycho-analytical method to her betrothed, she knew well that a strong and watchful helpmate would be necessary, if the best and brightest in his well-meaning, but somewhat plastic, character were to be kept uppermost. He stood at present an outcast and a scorn of men. Was it exactly a time to desert him and oppose frosty rules of perfection to his clumsy and futile but none the less heroic attempts to win her? Could she sail safely over chartered seas and watch Claude, with all his masts gone, wallow rudderless upon the rocks?

In a word, Vera's soul compounded and compromised, while her lips made conventional protests. Her two personalities played battledore and shuttlecock with her at this moment. She implored Felicity to be honourable, yet at the very bottom of her heart rejoiced to remember

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that Felicity's psychology was far subtler than her own. In fact, from a psycho-analytic standpoint, Felicity began where Vera left off. To be strictly scientific, the younger girl was not merely endowed with a dual personality, as the rest of us, but rejoiced in a triple, nay, a quadruple heritage and tenure on existence. Dr. Freud himself might well have despaired before her complexities and their inter-relations. To the well ordered mind, if it could have comprehended her at all, Felicity must have appeared fabulous—a survival from the old, spacious days of thought and action. She regarded the concepts of right and wrong with the indifference of the greater cats, and was now only concerned to create an atmosphere of obfuscation in her mother's mind—a hiatus and temporary confusion during which she and Augustus, Vera and Claude might achieve their purpose. As for her father, she troubled not at all. His peculiar gifts would fall easy victims to hers. Mr. Griffin and she saw alike in most things, and both were only desirous to create that air of verisimilitude about their future operations which should ensure success. Alone they had doubtless conquered easily enough: their sole real difficulty lay with Claude and Vera; for these higher considerations, that complicated the situation for Vera and the peer, did not exist for them.

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The end, so far as they were concerned, was assured, but they had not yet given up hope of attaining that end by constitutional rather than direct action. They were intensely human. Felicity really loved her mother and Augustus admired Mr. Fairbrother heartily, as one of nature's happiest achievements. There were also temporal considerations that made it desirable to win, if possible, without leaving a trace of bitterness on the hearts of the defeated. They plotted, therefore, with complete lack of principle, but no lack of good will in their young and devious hearts; while Claude and Vera looked on and deprecated, sighed and hoped.

It would not be difficult, psycho-analytically, to prove that they were the more blameworthy pair, since their ideals were in reality nobler and they both possessed a moral sense of obligation to the community unhappily denied to the Member of Parliament and his betrothed. But this will be enough psychology for the moment.

"We must prepare for the worst, Claude," said Vera, when they were alone.

"Can't we think of something and surprise them?" he asked; but she shook her head.

"No, no; you're far too honest to surprise anybody."

"It was the honesty of my family that did surprise your father," he reminded her. "If only

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Mrs. Fairbrother had not made a personal affair of it and dragged you and Felicity in too soon."

"Parents are always too personal where their families are concerned," she answered. "It makes my blood boil sometimes to hear parents discussing their children. It's the most delicate of all relationships ; but they never see it."

"I should feel it almost improper to insist so openly on the accident of parentage," declared Claude. "Once, when I was a little boy, I asked my dear mother if she loved a new diamond tiara better than she loved me. It was a tactless question no doubt ; but my mother—the soul of truth—replied that she did. 'Because, you see, I chose it myself, Claude,' she said, with that delicate Irish accent that made her speech so fascinating. I was hurt at the time, I confess ; but I see the point now."

"No, they don't choose us ; and yet how upset they always become if we hint we didn't choose them," mused Vera. "But why allow a connection for which nobody is responsible, to produce so much familiarity and candid criticism ?"

"Why, indeed ?" said Claude.

"What a long time they are," she murmured with her eyes on the garden.

"Yes, the steps they contemplate probably needs some careful thought. All the same, we

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mustn't be too other-worldly about it—I see that.”

The dual personality of Claude was working openly.

“I had hoped so much from our peaceful penetration,” resumed Vera; “but, of course, we had no time.”

“I doubt if Mrs. Fairbrother is the sort to be peacefully penetrated all the same,” he told her. “For my part I will, of course, go to considerable lengths.”

“You have,” she said.

“But there are some things I simply can't do.”

“There are some things I wouldn't let you do, Claude.”

“There's the gloomy satisfaction of knowing that Augustus and Felicity will stick at nothing, Vera.”

“It is only human to hope so. Mamma is strong-willed and determined; but if Felicity really sets to work, there can only be one result. She has, I fear, no conscience whatever where Gussy is concerned.”

“The advantage of no conscience is that you can't have a bad one,” explained Claude. “It's like teeth. Felicity will have nothing to ache afterwards, whatever she does.”

“But we shall. What is life without a good conscience, Claude?”

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"I may soon be in a position to tell you," he replied. "Of course one might bolt with you and snap one's finger at convention."

"That would be to surrender to convention," she answered. "To consult a girl's parents and let everything be open and above board and honourable is the truly unconventional attitude. To be conventional, we should clope, and I should find you already had a wife—perhaps several. I only want to feel that, when we are on our death-beds, Claude, nobody has much to forgive."

"You never get anything but kindness on your deathbed, I assure you. Be bright. Look—here they come. See how sparkling Felicity is!"

"I dread that triumphant expression on the face of Augustus," she answered, as the others returned. Felicity had plucked Augustus a handsome tuft of rhododendron, which he was now wearing in his buttonhole.

"She has found a way!" cried the Barrister, blithely.

"For all of us, or only for you?" inquired his friend.

"For us all," said Felicity.

"Straightforward or—diplomatic?" inquired Claude.

"Right or wrong?" asked Vera.

"It is above good and evil, Vera!" answered

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Mr. Griffin ; and her heart, torn between her personalities, hesitated whether to sink or rise.

"Everything now depends upon the extent of Claude's love for you," he continued. "Felicity feels it is utterly futile to waste all that we have done so far. Her idea is to go on with it."

"But Mrs. Fairbrother isn't going on with it ; she's finished with it," replied Claude.

"No," answered Felicity. "Mamma has merely failed so far to believe you—for want of evidence."

"If she couldn't believe Gussy, she'll never believe anybody," declared Claude. "Why, Mr. Fairbrother believed him, and I believed him, and he pretty nearly believed himself."

"I did," said Augustus. "The story seemed so probable in my hands that I thoroughly believed it. I still do. And Mrs. Fairbrother must be made to believe it—as a preliminary to still better things. Where's the Venus?"

Lord Mountracey handed the archaic statuette to Mr. Griffin, who thanked him and secreted it as before.

"The point to grasp, old man, is that you took the Bronze," he continued.

"But he didn't take the Bronze," said Vera stoutly.

"We must all firmly believe that Claude took the Bronze," repeated Augustus.

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"No Mountracey could have taken it," said Claude.

"Exactly!" cried Felicity eagerly. "And what follows?"

"It follows that I didn't take the Bronze," replied Claude.

"But you *did* take the Bronze, old boy, so you're not a Mountracey—see?" retorted Augustus triumphantly.

Crushing disappointment sat on the fair features of Vera. Her lower and higher self were alike dismayed.

"Is that all you could think of?" she asked.

"I certainly am a Mountracey," said Claude thoughtfully. "In fact the head of the clan."

"You think so, Claude; but once let Augustus prove that you're not, and then——" answered Felicity.

"Prove Claude isn't Claude!" gasped Vera.

"It sounds much harder than it is," explained Augustus. "In law it's often a most difficult thing to prove a person is himself; but comparatively easy to prove he's someone else. If only Claude will put his heart into this and leave the details to me, all should yet be well—as far as you and Vera are concerned."

"If we can convince papa and mamma that you're not really and truly a Mountracey, then they haven't a leg to stand upon," explained

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Felicity. "And it is well within our power to do so."

"I don't care what happens to me," answered the lover of Vera. "I'm long past caring. But my race——"

"There! didn't I say he'd put his wretched relations before everything?" asked Vera's sister bitterly, with keen exasperation in her voice.

"This is no time for ancestor-worship," said Augustus, resuming his sling and black patch. "Come home, Claude. I'll explain in the car. Your father," he continued, turning to Vera, "will get a prepaid telegram in an hour or two, and a letter from Claude's solicitors by special messenger to-night. Keep Mr. Fairbrother up to it. Be determined. Say that things can't stop here. Put these on again for the moment, Claude." He picked up the handcuffs from the sofa. "We will go as we came. Mrs. Fairbrother may be watching."

Nupkins entered as he spoke.

"Mr. Fairbrother's compliments, and he'll thank you to leave the house instanter, please," said the butler.

"We are doing so," replied Claude. "Good-bye, girls."

"Good-bye till to-morrow," answered Felicity lightly.

Lord Mountracey turned to Nupkins.

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"Do not be quick to think evil of us," he said. "You yourself may some day know what it is to be the victim of circumstances."

"You don't get into things like them by accident," retorted the old man, regarding Claude's bonds.

"Indeed you do. Few assume them intentionally. Many a better man than I am has worn them, Nupkins," replied Claude.

"I believe you," said the obdurate domestic.

Then he led the way and the young men followed him.

Vera turned to her sister when they were once more alone.

"Can I trust you, dear Felicity?" she asked.

"No, dear Vera, you certainly can't; but I hope you can trust to-morrow," replied the younger.

"Nobody can ever trust to-morrow," answered Vera, who had aged a little, as we all must, when the dual personality is working under full steam.

"You're melancholy. Claude's so horribly depressing to-day," replied Felicity.

"Duty is depressing," murmured Vera.

"You mustn't look upon him as a duty. He's a pleasure, or he's nothing," asserted her sister.

"Be a patient, good girl, and don't worry."

"I want to be good—so does Claude; but

you and Gussy are making it impossible," answered Vera sadly.

"Perfection is for the future life, not this one," said the chosen of Augustus. "We shall only have to be good in the next world; here, unfortunately, we've got to be wise as well."

"If one could only have the wisdom of the serpent without the poison," moaned her sister.

XVII

AT THE BRITISH MUSEUM

ON the following day, the younger Miss Fairbrother and Mr. Griffin were partaking of a light luncheon in the refreshment room of the British Museum. A bun and a glass of milk sufficed Felicity, while Augustus found his requirements satisfied with a glass of dry sherry and a still dryer biscuit.

What strange and subterranean development had brought them there time will resolve ; for the moment, being both by nature intellectual and appreciating ideas, they discussed a subject inspired by a recent visit to that crowded and ill-ordered department of the Museum known as the Cast Room.

“ I believe you have a good deal of the faun in you yourself, Augustus : there’s even a look of the Praxitelean faun in your face sometimes, combined with the Praxitelean Hermes. In fact, only a faun could do the things you have done—and are going to do.”

So spoke Felicity, and he admitted it.

“I have a streak of those magical, nonsuch creatures in me,” confessed Augustus. “Perhaps it’s well for us that I have. It keeps me young, and preserves me from pipe-clay and routine and jog-trot in general. Earth was happier when the goat-foot fauns danced upon it, for then man still cherished his dreams, read mystery into the voices of earth and air, found the first hint of a double personality in his shadow, or his reflexion thrown up to him from silent pools. Fearful he was ; but mankind is fearful still. Have most of us outgrown fear and the children of fear ? Do we not tremble and play the coward as often as the men of the Stone Age ? We embrace our tragic endowment of fear as a matter of course, and our melancholy wisdom trembles even oftener than the blank ignorance of early man. Our lives are girt about with darkness greater than any that gloomed the life of the palæolith, while much that endeared life to him exists for us no longer.”

“You are never so attractive as when you are serious,” declared Felicity. “Pray go on. I shall develop this side of you after marriage, Augustus.”

“Man travelled farther when he travelled light,” resumed the first speaker, “and we, who groan under our weight of knowledge, with every step a weariness and progress a pain, have for-

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gotten the days when life was still a miracle, with wonderment on the mountain-tops and magic in the valleys. The adventure, indeed, is not ended. It will never end while such beings as Augustus and his Felicity remain to throw a flash of the old fires ; but the bulk of mankind moves still in a circle, along the level, cowardly ways of least resistance. The spirit is sleeping—stified by increase of learning. Who heeds the voices of the thunder now that science has explained their cause ? who seeks to unravel the scrip of the lightning, now we no longer believe a Spirit holds the pen ? ”

“ Who, indeed ? ” echoed Felicity.

“ Staggering under our monstrous packs of knowledge,” continued Augustus, “ our legs shake at a pebble, our owl eyes magnify a mole-hill into a mountain lifted upon our path ; the trifles, that our rude fore-fathers kicked with naked toes to nothing, now forbid our advance and block the journey, even though its purpose was nothing but good will to our fellow-man. Our sophisticated noses smell danger, our microscopic eyes magnify difficulty, where neither need exist. Our over-laden heads are sick of a surfeit and learning, like frost, begins above and freezes downward to our hearts. Learning’s metaphysical webs, sparkle though they may, catch nothing but action and arrest only the

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ideas and inspirations that were far better on the wing. The last iridescence of the gossamer is called 'pragmatism'—a philosophy bristling with reasons that were never born of reason; a shivering shadow concerned to make life 'comfortable'—a concept with its tail between its legs seeking one thing only: safety; fearful, like Panurge, of only one thing: danger."

"You never feared danger, more than any other faun," murmured Felicity.

"Never. What is life without it? A dirge! But we drag our rusty chains and would feel naked and uncovered if they were taken off. We hug our mummies to our bosoms—festering tyrants all, for whom the forgiving earth has yawned a thousand years. Nobody is brave enough to fling down the rotting merchandise, quit the circus round and climb up into the upper air, where the sun shines on the crag and sweet air is blowing still for everything that lives!"

"Because those that might do so love power better than sacrifice, and fear the pathway where few will follow," answered Felicity.

"True knowledge is entirely hidden under our accumulated rubbish-heaps of learning," proceeded the Member of Parliament earnestly. "The vital verities are a modest company; and they lie hidden high above the lush thickets of gross and rampant wisdom. And one of these

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verities is 'Romance'—poor, discredited, vilified Romance.

"Beautiful things without number have been left to us by that spirit—of which are you and I, Felicity; yet the modern generation will have none of it. Our artists, while winning their highest happiness—often their only happiness—from the work of creating, are no longer concerned to let a ray of that happiness glimmer through to the rest of us. They move in the murk, squeaking joyfully to themselves, like bats; but where is our joy? what do they bring us? A man told me not long ago—a man whose shoes it is held correct to lick—that Romance was a lie; and many another high-browed hierophant says the same, though often enough it is only the twinkle of romance in their own work that keeps it sweet, or can preserve it as long as a box of tinned sardines."

"I know," answered Felicity. "I'm sure Romance is as much a true-born child of reality as realism. Look at you; you are pure romance, Augustus, and yet how real! From the moment I saw you wobble towards me as a poached egg, I felt that you revived the soul of the old, great romantics."

"Romance is not a lie," summed up Augustus, "for falsehood works no miracles. Never did untruth build our palaces of immortal art—the

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big things wrought from exquisite fables and enshrining everlasting facts."

"The Rainbow of Romance will still shine against the dark clouds of reality as long as you and I are here—and still fairly young," she promised ; whereupon he paid for their modest meal and consulted his watch.

"The position lies in a nutshell now," he said, returning to their own affairs, "and we, at least, move for the moment under that rainbow to which you refer. I will not trust myself to speak plainly, even though nothing but these Etruscan remains can hear me. It suffices that dear Mr. Fairbrother has consented to attend the office of Claude's solicitors, Messrs Forbes, Gradley and Son, this afternoon at four o'clock, that he may recover the Bronze and hear a statement from the head of the firm concerning dear old Claude himself."

She nodded.

"The letter from Messrs. Forbes and Gradley went far to reassure papa. He knows the firm by repute and was gratified to learn that Claude's affairs were in such respectable hands."

"He had detectives outside my chambers last night ; and other detectives are no doubt watching Claude. None, however, but you know I am here at present. Will your mother accompany Mr. Fairbrother to the office ? "

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“Undoubtedly.”

“Everything then depends upon Claude,” said Mr. Griffin. “I have gone as far as I dared with Claude; but it cannot be denied that an element of danger still exists. However, he has plunged so deeply that it is difficult to see how he can draw back now, without disgracing himself as much as me. There is one other danger.”

“Mr. Gradley?”

“Exactly,” said Augustus. “Young Gradley is wax in my hands; but the present head of the firm—however, I do not anticipate any real peril there.”

“As for us ——?” asked Felicity.

“For you and me it is impossible that my plans can miscarry,” he replied. “You will attend the conference with your family, and tell Vera that you have seen me start to Scotland for a month’s salmon fishing—or say Norway—Norway has such an inaccessible sound.”

Then Augustus kissed Felicity, in the portico of the museum beside that attractive fragment from Norfolk Island; and while he returned into the building, she walked slowly to the main entrance, attracted a taxi-cabman and directed him to take her to the Army and Navy stores.

XVIII

THE LAWYER'S OFFICE

THE private room of old Mr. Gradley at his office in Lincoln's Inn was of a stern and forbidding aspect. On this afternoon in the Long Vacation, even the cheerful light of day could not lend any charm to the severe and unattractive apartment. The white blind was drawn up over dusty panes; curtains there were none. To the right of the chamber stood a large flat-topped desk with a stiff-backed chair behind it, while behind the chair was a door, grimy and knotted. A bundle of papers tied with red tape reposed upon the table, and round the walls there were ranged black tin boxes, having the names of clients written upon them in white letters. These were very numerous, and among more celebrated appellations might have been observed that of "Lord Claude Mountracey," while beside it, a modest receptacle evidently contained the affairs of "The Hon. Maude Fetherstonhaugh." A solitary portrait adorned the mantelpiece. It was an enlargement of a

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photograph and represented a very venerable but untidy, white-bearded man.

Half a dozen wooden chairs and a small book-case of legal works completed the contents of the chamber, while upon the floor was an Axminster carpet of the most repellant aspect, for the pattern had been worn off save in patches; the carpet was not dying like a gentleman.

Silence reigned, nor did any stir or bustle resound from the outer office. As a matter of fact the establishment was empty, save for a solitary figure who sat deep in thought upon one of the chairs in Mr. Gradley's sanctum; while making "sunshine in a shady place," upon the flat-topped desk there smiled radiantly an exquisite work of art.

The solitary man was Lord Mountracey; the work of art, needless to say, the Venus of Naxos. In the profound stillness subdued sounds from time to time might have been heard behind the inner door already mentioned; but Claude paid them no attention: he continued to meditate, not without evidences of anxiety. Then the electric outer bell of the office rang and he rose to answer the door, having first consulted his watch. It was, however, too early for the arrival of Mr. and Mrs. Fairbrother, and indeed the bell had not been rung by them. Vera appeared, whereupon, expressing the keenest gratification,

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Claude admitted her and shut the door again. She followed him to Mr. Gradley's private room and did not refuse the kiss he offered.

"Papa and mamma not here?" she asked.
"Then I ought not to be here either, Claude."

"Strictly speaking, Vera, perhaps none of us ought to be here," he answered vaguely. "This is my solicitor's office, and, naturally, I never come to it myself if I can help it. However, all will soon be clear, together with my reasons for so earnestly begging your parents to attend me and Mr. Gradley. It was generous of them to come and I hope they will be rewarded. Let nothing, however, surprise you, or shake your love for me, Vera."

"The truth will never do that," she replied.

"We must not be pedantic or morbid, but approach the situation in an Elizabethan spirit," said Claude, and she looked at him suspiciously.

"That sounds horribly like Augustus," she sighed. "You speak of the situation. What is it?"

"We must allow ourselves to float gently down the river of events," he answered. "That, at least, is what I am going to do. My old friend and solicitor is to make public certain facts concerning me, Vera. These are for the ears of your family alone. I had never thought they would come to the light. But now they must."

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"The Venus!" she exclaimed. "Thank Heaven! Papa will be reassured."

"That was my first thought."

"He is torn in half between a sincere and natural regard for you, which he cannot conquer—you *do* grow upon people so—and a deep suspicion and dislike of Augustus," explained Vera. "He finds Augustus intensely interesting, but highly objectionable, as interesting people so often are. Wicked men oughtn't to be interesting really; but human nature's so unreasonable. Why should papa admire you most, and yet have this macabre fascination for Augustus?"

"Regard Augustus as done with, for the present at any rate," answered Claude. "I was saying there is a family skeleton in every cupboard, Vera."

"Papa thinks yours must be congenital kleptomania, dear Claude. You don't mind my telling you?"

"Not in the least. He may be right."

"Whatever it is, I shall not lack the purest, truest sympathy. All great families have their skeletons—many more than one," said Vera.

"It's the skeletons with flesh on their bones that bother most of the old families. You can generally live down a person when he's no longer alive himself," declared Claude.

"Is yours a living skeleton?"

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"No," he answered. "I shouldn't call it that exactly."

"We too, alas! have our family skeleton," murmured Vera.

"Good!" answered Claude "—you and I will exchange skeletons some day. Other people's are so much easier to manage than your own."

"Ours must be a secret for ever," she answered. "It is dear papa's special, haunting, ever-present sorrow—and nobly he has borne it."

Claude nodded sympathetically.

"You mean your mother."

"No—no—how can you?" she cried indignantly. "Mamma has helped him to endure it. It happened long before we were born; and we have supported him, too, and tried to make light of it for years and years. But it will go to his grave with him. We cannot prevent that."

"Ah, nobody knows where one's skeleton pinches except oneself," mused Claude.

"I cannot share papa's skeleton with you," continued Vera, "but happily I can share yours. Tell me everything, dearest."

He shook his head, however.

"Better leave it to old Gradley. I hardly trust myself——"

Vera flushed.

"Which means that you can't trust me. You deny me your skeleton? I am hurt, Claude. If I

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had a skeleton, you should be the first—— This means that you have done wrong and dread to tell me. Yet who more likely to forgive and forget than I ? ”

“ I know—I rely upon that. What we have got to do is this : to enlighten your parents concerning certain cloudy data respecting my past.”

“ Claude ! It isn’t another woman ? ”

Vera leapt off her office chair and her face grew pale.

“ I don’t think so. No, no, I certainly wouldn’t just flow down the river of events if it was another woman,” answered Lord Mountracey.

“ Then be frank. Let me know the worst, that I may support you against papa and mamma.”

Claude continued to be strangely vague.

“ The facts will redound to my credit if anything. That’s why we are divulging them. It was all so long ago. I’ve got the details a bit mixed myself. I shouldn’t do myself justice.”

“ You do not trust me,” she repeated sadly. “ You are ashamed of your family skeleton, Claude ! ”

“ No, I’m not—not for a moment. I hope I shall be proud of it. And, anyway, you won’t tell me about yours, Vera, so why should I tell you about mine ? ”

Happily for Claude the office bell rang again at this moment and he leapt up to answer it.

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"They're before their time," he said, and left her.

It was not, however, Vera's parents, but her sister who now joined them ; and she found Vera gently mopping her eyes when she did so.

Expressing a moment's keen gratification at the spectacle of the Bronze, Felicity turned to Vera.

"What's the matter ? " she asked.

"Claude's so—absurdly reticent about his family skeleton," replied Vera.

"Quite nice of him," answered the younger. "We shall hear all there is to hear soon. I dare say it's nothing at all. The hope is that papa, when he gathers these family particulars, will view Claude in a new and gracious light ; and mamma too. They both want to like him if it's possible. Look how cheerfully my mascotte twinkles at us ! "

Felicity approached the Bronze and bent her head to it affectionately.

"What does she say now ? " asked Claude, who was not wholly devoid of an unreasoning element of superstition.

"She says, 'Always do what you want to first—and explain afterwards,' " replied Felicity. "The mere sight of a man doing exactly what he wants to do is so rare and exhilarating, that honest people are more inclined to applaud than criticise."

THE BRONZE VENUS

"Where have you been?" asked Vera.

"Doing what I wanted to do—lunching with Gussy," answered Felicity. "He sent Claude all kinds of kind messages and trusted that everything would be happily settled. We went to the British Museum—to see the Elgin Marbles," she added.

Vera regarded her sister reproachfully.

"How could you go there—knowing poor papa——?" She broke off and sighed, while Claude expressed his astonishment.

"Gussy looking at the Elgin Marbles!" he said. "Has he lost his reason?"

"We were rather sad," explained Felicity. "That won't surprise you, Vera, at any rate. And Gussy thought that the Elgin Marbles would correct our perspective and remind us that we weren't everybody. There's nothing like Greek art of the best period for making you feel you're not everybody. So we went, and the statues bucked us up. We shall go on quietly and patiently hoping for better times; and we thought of your happiness too."

"For some things I almost wish Augustus could have been here," said Vera, in a moment of weakness.

"No," answered Felicity. "I saw him off to Norway. He has gone to catch salmon and try to find peace. He will no doubt catch salmon,

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because no fish can pit itself against the brain of Augustus ; but he will never find peace without me. He was a good deal hurt that papa had sent detectives to watch his flat last night."

"I, too, was hurt that he had them watching mine," said Claude. "Hurt, but not surprised. I shall, however, keep my temper to the end."

"Yes, indeed," said Felicity earnestly. "You must do that, Claude—for all our sakes. Almost the last word Augustus said was, that he hoped, whatever you might hear, you would be passive."

Felicity looked at the table.

"What solemn documents!" she said; but Vera was puzzled.

"Don't you *know* what you're going to hear, Claude?" she asked.

"Yes," he answered, "of course, Vera. The statement will bear upon the past—my earliest days—so I believe. There is a slight shadow over my beginnings; but not cast by me. An infant can't cast shadows if it's healthy and normal. And these documents substantiate certain facts. Mr. Gradley will read them to us. I shall wear sack-cloth and ashes I dare say——"

"You'll always look a gentleman, whatever you wear—and whoever you really are, Claude," said Felicity kindly.

Vera's heart began to beat hard. Could it be that Felicity knew more of Claude's family

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skeleton than he was prepared to confess to her ? For a moment she felt forebodings and fell back upon Mrs. Fairbrother.

“Mamma will see through any deviation from truth, Claude,” she said.

“It is for Claude to convince mamma,” answered Felicity. “Let Claude keep his nerve, even if provoked to lose it. As a matter of fact, far too much depends upon Claude for safety ; but we can only hope that he will rise to the situation.”

“I’m going to ; I’m going to,” replied Lord Mountracey irritably.

And then the electric bell rang for the third time.

XIX

WHEELS WITHIN WHEELS

“**T**HAT must be your parents,” decided his lordship, “because it can’t be anybody else.”

“I will let them in,” replied Vera, and went to do so.

Felicity took the opportunity to whisper yet another direction to her future brother-in-law.

“Be brave,” she said, “and don’t let anything you hear make you angry. If you fail, you’re utterly lost. Pretend you are listening to a story about somebody else—something that’s got nothing to do with you at all. Remember that it’s all romance. Marriage with Vera is the reality.”

“I shall hide nothing after we’re married,” he replied gloomily.

“Why be so horribly selfish? Don’t let love for Vera make you selfish—even after you’re married. She must never know,” answered Felicity firmly.

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"Confession is good for one's soul," he said.

"Yes; but often jolly bad for other people's souls," she reminded him; "that's why I say, 'don't be selfish.'"

Then Vera returned, bringing with her Mr. and Mrs. Fairbrother.

They were attired in black and both revealed a measure of gloomy perturbation.

Claude bowed. He too was attired in black.

"You are come, Sir, I see?" said Mr. Fairbrother.

"Where's the Bronze, Lord Mountracey?" asked Mrs. Fairbrother.

"Here—here to welcome dear papa!" said Felicity, and handed the Venus to her father.

With a wordless sound of thankfulness, Josiah received the treasure and took it to the window, that he might examine it in every detail.

"I wish I could offer you more comfortable chairs" said Claude. "Why do lawyers always have such uncomfortable chairs?"

"Nothing like uncomfortable chairs, when you have to hear uncomfortable things," answered Mrs. Fairbrother, sitting very stiff, upright and unbending.

"I wouldn't go as far as that," murmured Lord Mountracey. "The discomfort, so far as I am able to judge, will lie rather with me

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than you, Mrs. Fairbrother. You and your husband have most graciously agreed for our young sakes, to sacrifice valuable time; but I should never have ventured to beg so great a favour, had I not been sure the facts to be laid before you, will go far to extenuate my ghastly error of the past."

"To know all is to forgive all—especially with people like papa and mamma," ventured Felicity.

"I know enough," answered Mrs. Fairbrother. She was in an unyielding mood.

Her husband spoke.

"So far, so good," he said. "The Bronze is without flaw or blemish, save those dealt to it by the centuries."

"Not a fraud? Not a cunning copy of the original?" asked Mrs. Fairbrother remorselessly. "You know how that Italian Prince treated you," she added.

"Mamma!" cried Vera, "you forget of whom you are speaking."

"No, Vera," her parent replied. "I may, or may not, forgive; but forget—never. And I don't forget his friend. A man is judged by his friends."

"I hope the time may come when you will see Augustus in a clearer light," murmured Lord Mountracey.

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"I hope the time may come when his constituents will—and his clients, if he's got any," she replied.

"A draconian mood!" whispered Claude to Vera.

"To-day, at any rate, we are free of a presence undoubtedly sinister," said Mr. Fairbrother.

"I never wish to hear that name again," declared his wife.

"He'll make it so famous some day that the King will change it," prophesied Felicity.

"For a number," retorted her unyielding mother.

"Is your solicitor young or old?" inquired Josiah, and Claude pointed to the portrait on the wall.

"About eighty, I believe."

"Then we ought to be able to trust him," said Mrs. Fairbrother.

"We are here," continued her husband, "at your earnest wish, to learn particulars concerning yourself that may alter our present opinions. I confess I should like to think better of you. It is always more agreeable to associate the name of a fellow-creature with a pleasant incident than a painful one."

"And I may say this," snapped Mrs. Fairbrother. "You'll never make me believe you

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stole the Bronze ; and a hundred lawyers won't."

"Thank you," replied the peer heartily.

"Is Mr. Gradley here ? " asked Felicity.

"Yes, waiting our convenience," replied Claude ;
"but first I have a sparkling little item of news. Lord Bolsover is delighted to let Mr. Fairbrother have his castle for thirty thousand. It was only a wretched house-agent who held out for more from force of habit."

"I'm glad to hear it," said Mr. Fairbrother.

"Yes," continued Claude, approaching the gnarled door behind the desk. "And I'm on the track of several other showy ruins."

"I thank you," said Mr. Fairbrother.

"We are ready, Mr. Gradley, if you please," shouted Lord Mountracey, and an old, thin voice answered.

"I am at your lordship's service."

The door opened and an ancient man, with a bald head and flowing white beard joined the company. He wore spectacles, an old-fashioned neck-cloth and collar, an old-fashioned coat, baggy trousers and massive boots. He was in fact, obviously enough, the original of the sole picture that adorned his office.

Claude introduced the visitors.

"Mr. and Mrs. Fairbrother ; Miss Fairbrother ; Miss Felicity Fairbrother—Mr. Grad-

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ley, my valued friend and family adviser," he said.

The venerable solicitor bowed and sank into the chair behind his desk. He then began to unfasten the papers lying upon it.

"Be seated, please," he said. "It is his lordship's wish that Mr. Fairbrother and his family becomes acquainted with these intensely private affairs."

"It is," declared Claude solemnly.

"The secret has been kept jealously," continued Mr. Gradley. "At this moment, Lord Mountracey and myself are the only living persons familiar with it. I never thought he would divulge the matter; but if, as I understand, he contemplates an alliance with Mr. Fairbrother's family, he is no doubt too scrupulous to conceal the extraordinary truth."

"What's he done now?" asked Mrs. Fairbrother bluntly.

"He has done nothing whatever. He supports an honoured name to the manner born," answered Mr. Gradley.

"The last and finest vintage of a venerable vine," said Felicity; but her father reproved her.

"Not so much poetry, please," he said. "Let us get to business."

"We are dealing with an ancient race and

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truth will not hurt the dead," began the aged solicitor.

"Truth cannot hurt my ancestors—that's quite certain," declared Claude, and Mr. Gradley turned upon him.

"Who were your ancestors? I am among friends, of course, and speak freely as you direct. You have confessed to me a recent lamentable lapse in connection with this ancient statuette; and when I heard it, the past rose up before me—to explain that lapse. Indeed, nothing is so difficult to bury as the past. We lawyers all know that."

"Yes, quite so; but——" began Lord Mount-racey, when his future sister-in-law cut him short.

"Do be quiet, Claude, and let Mr. Gradley talk," she said. "We don't want to live here."

"The facts need occupy but a few moments," resumed Mr. Gradley. "Lord Mountracey is understood to be an only son—indeed, an only child."

"Much may be forgiven an only child," declared Mr. Fairbrother.

"So I think," admitted the lawyer. "His father married, somewhat late in life, an Irish lady who herself could no longer be described as young."

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"My mother was thirty-two on her wedding day," said Claude, and the man of business showed irritation.

"Really I think it might save our time if his lordship would leave me to make this revelation without him," he remarked, somewhat testily. "I am not used to be interrupted. These facts were to be related at his own wish, and if I am not to hear the sound of my own voice——"

"Go and walk about in the square, Claude. Perhaps there's a fountain and gold fish to calm you," advised Felicity.

Claude expressed regret.

"Sorry—a thousand apologies. I won't speak again if I can possibly help it."

"Recall the extreme gravity of the occasion and what may hang upon it, and control yourself," urged Mr. Gradley. Then he proceeded.

"Now had his late lordship failed of an heir, the title, revenues and estates must all have devolved upon a distant cousin whom he detested. Anything was better than that. But the years passed and——"

"I was born——" began Claude.

Mr. Gradley flashed behind his spectacles and flung his papers violently on to his desk.

"Everybody knows you were born," said Mrs. Fairbrother, and Lord Mountracey apologised and subsided again.

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“But where?” pursued the solicitor. “Where were you born? That is beyond human knowledge and brings us to the threshold of the Mountracey mystery. Failing direct offspring, the late Lady Mountracey—a noble and impetuous woman—with Irish resource and originality, inspired her husband to——”

“My mother—” began Claude, but Mr. Gradley swept him aside with a gesture.

“Let everything be forgiven. The temptation was extreme; the justification complete. You are the justification! An heir was demanded—an heir appeared. Some virile daughter of the proletariat surrendered her babe for this high destiny, and the world learned that Lady Mountracey had borne a son. In a word, Lord Mountracey is no Mountracey save by adoption. Your error with regard to the Bronze, my lord, was not due to Norman blood, as has been suspected, but rather your purely Anglo-Saxon ancestry.”

“Then there is no bar to your union with Vera, dear Claude!” cried Felicity.

The deep silence that followed was broken by a sound like the snort of a charging rhinoceros. It came from Lord Mountracey, and all eyes were bent upon him, to find the young man terribly transfigured. His blue eyes blazed. His colour had risen till it resembled the royal purple

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of a peony ; his very moustache abandoned its droop and bristled, and his hands suddenly clenched into fists, so that the black kid gloves upon them cracked at the seams. He was as one possessed.

APOTHEOSIS OF CLAUDE

“ **H**OARY scoundrel — wretch — cold-blooded knave ! ” bellowed his lordship, in a voice that seemed to resound with the hollow intonation of a lion’s rather than a man’s. “ I would have stood much and was prepared to sacrifice my own untarnished fame, for love of Miss Fairbrother. But not my mother’s fame ; not my father’s fame ; not the fame of my grandparents and great grandparents ; for all are implicated in this infamous fabrication. I warned you ; I bade you leave the dead alone at any cost ; now it only remains to expose you ; and that I shall do.”

“ Another liar ? ” asked Mrs. Fairbrother icily, staring upon the aged and sullen object of Claude’s scorn.

“ No—the same obstinate, inveterate, audacious and abominable liar ! ” shouted Lord Mount-racey. “ In a word—Augustus ! ”

Three voices simultaneously echoed the dread name.

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"Augustus!" cried Mr. Fairbrother, his wife and Vera in divers accent of horror and amazement.

The reprobate removed his bald wig, cast aside his flowing beard, took off his spectacles and stood gazing upon them with the expression of a newly-fallen angel.

"Yes," he said quietly, dropping the strident accent of senility and resuming his own mellow and agreeable voice. "Yes—poor, hard-working, unfortunate, disappointed Augustus."

"Loathsome object!" ejaculated Mrs. Fairbrother.

"I suppose I am," he admitted.

Josiah was as one stunned. The impersonation had almost petrified him with astonishment, and for a moment he quite forgot the enormity of the deceit in the histrionic triumph of the achievement. Art was really second nature to Mr. Fairbrother.

"Astounding—beyond belief," he murmured.

Augustus bowed slightly and acknowledged the compliment.

"It was a toss up with me at one time whether I went to the boards, or the bar, dear Mr. Fairbrother," he said. "I decided, however, for the law, because only actresses reach the peerage; actors can't manage it. The truth is," he added

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regarding them with a recondite expression, "none of you people understand me."

"The man who says that is generally understood only too well," answered Sophia Fairbrother.

"The world sees through most of us, sooner or later," admitted her husband, whose wonder was now giving place to detestation.

"On this occasion I had hoped it would have been later; however——"

Felicity interrupted her betrothed. She had been quietly indicating hatred of Claude, who was now returned to his normal purity of colouring.

"Gussy's motives——" began Felicity; but Mr. Griffin broke the thread of her discourse.

"When we begin talking about motives, Felicity, it is a sign of failure," he confessed. "I have failed, because I trusted to a broken reed. Claude is no accomplice for an ingenious and high-spirited man. Claude is too good to be true in my opinion. I thought he had more courage, more character—above all, more self control. I thought he loved Vera better than his ancestral free-booters, crusaders, and the rest of them. I was wrong. He does not know the meaning of love."

His lordship's hue again deepened.

"Miserable person," he answered. "Could I

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wed Vera with this blot upon my history? I am not thinking of my crusaders. I am thinking of her and her alone now. Even had I pretended that I was no Mountracey, what would she have said to find me changed into a nameless Anglo-Saxon bounder without great-grand-parents? Could I offer her that?"

"Evidently not," replied Augustus coldly; "and now all is over and you can't offer her anything at all."

"I can at least offer her a reputable memory," retorted the heaving peer. "She shall, at any rate, love and respect the name of my cherished mother, though mine may no longer cross her lips. Rather a thousand times we part for ever than that Vera Fairbrother should wed on the post-mortem dishonour of two of the best people who ever walked this earth. Their good name is dearer to me than anything in this world, and while prepared, Heaven forgive me, to eclipse my own for the sake of Vera and my undying passion, I was never prepared to take my mother's or my father's name in vain. And only a man dead to all the finer feelings, and quite ignorant of my true character, would have thought that I could. I have been wickedly deluded by a false friend and am, once more, humbled in the dust."

"Not entirely," replied Mr. Fairbrother, regarding Claude's acute emotion. "You come

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out of it, if I may judge, with a certain modicum of credit. Your native honesty and breeding have at least confounded this unprincipled creature's craft. He emerges more shamefully from gross stratagem than you do. Indeed, only the devil himself could have put such an idea into his head."

Mr. Griffin cast a look from under his dark eyebrows in the direction of Felicity ; while she bent her own inscrutable orbs upon the Venus of Naxos.

"I am glad you resent this outrage on your father and mother, and ancestors generally," continued Mr. Fairbrother. "There is something in birth after all apparently. I cherish the deepest affection for my own dear father and mother. So does my wife for hers ; so I had hoped did my daughters for their parents ; but I begin to fear I was wrong."

"We adore you both, papa," said Vera, who was on the brink of tears.

But Mr. Fairbrother held up his hand for silence.

"To traduce the departed always exasperates me beyond measure. To strike at those who are powerless to strike back—what word can indicate such cowardice ? I have hit hard and often in my career ; but I never hit a man when he was down, still less when he was dead."

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“Or a woman either,” said Mrs. Fairbrother.

“A subtle, deep-laid plot, and I am thankful Lord Mountracey was not base enough to support it,” summed up Josiah ; whereupon Augustus spoke.

“In that case I am glad also,” he said. “Attach no blame whatever to Claude. He was the dupe of his own devoted yearning for Vera. He felt that the world was lost if she were lost ; and now that she is, he will go into some Order and don the cowl and tonsure. He has told me that was the only alternative. He has been faultless from the first—simply splendid.”

“I want no praise from you, Griffin,” said his lordship coldly ; but the Member of Parliament was not abashed.

“I can’t help it, old boy,” he answered. “Claude knew nothing whatever of what I was going to say. He did not realise that the only possible way for him was to sacrifice the blue blood in his veins ; nor did he consider what that must involve for his progenitors until my narrative burst upon him. All this wickedness and subterfuge are mine. I misjudged Claude and Mrs. Fairbrother and Mr. Fairbrother and everybody. A lifetime in the law has vitiated my perspective and poisoned my knowledge of human nature. It was I who took the Bronze and sprang it on Claude. Yes, Mrs. Fairbrother, you were right,

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as you always are. Your lightning sense of truth confounded me. At the touch of Ithuriel's spear, I turned into my demoniac self, as you see."

"No poetry please," said Mr. Fairbrother sternly.

"Claude is absolutely innocent of every weakness," continued Mr. Griffin. "A straighter, more trustworthy man doesn't exist. We, who are base, know honesty when we see it—none so well."

But Felicity had endured enough.

"Don't chatter, Gussy," she said. "Go and get out of those ridiculous clothes. To be wicked is bad enough; but to be wicked dressed like that——"

She picked up various fragments of the dismantled Mr. Gradley and bade her betrothed retire.

"I go," replied Augustus, casting aside his animation and speaking in deep and melancholy tones, "and I leave my character in your hands."

"You are absolutely devoid of character," answered Mr. Fairbrother.

"And only imitate respectable people, because you are ashamed of yourself," added his wife.

Augustus who was already half-way through the door, with the various objects of his futile illusion, replied :

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“Who can do better than try and imitate a good man, dear Mrs. Fairbrother?”

Then he vanished and the door shut behind him.

“We breathe a purer air,” said the outraged engineer.

XXI

BEATIFICATION OF CLAUDE

“**I** SHOULD now like to say a few words before I leave you for ever,” began Claude, when Mr. Griffin was, for the moment, a thing of the past.

“Speak then,” answered Mr. Fairbrother.

“Only this—I must be sportsmanlike. I was quite as bad as Augustus—every bit—possibly worse.”

“No, Claude; you shall not say that,” responded Vera.

“I was,” he repeated. “I’ve been just as much a benighted outsider as Gussy—quite as bad, only not so fiendishly clever. I must take my fair share of your censure and contempt; and that’s half. I have told just as many lies and was just as abominable in every way as Gussy. I want to make a clean breast of it and feel my mind at rest. Then I can try to bear the penance in some lonely cell, out of sight and sound of my fellow creatures for ever more.”

“Do not delude yourself,” said Mr. Fair-

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brother. "There is little reason to imagine you would succeed as an anchorite, and every reason to suppose you would not. You are gregarious—too gregarious—too prone to trust in others, pitifully weak."

"And wicked too—wicked too," said Claude.

"Well, you needn't harp on it," replied Vera. "The past is past. You are forgiven. Papa sees through your dual personality to the true man beneath."

"What was the meaning of this crime?" asked Mrs. Fairbrother.

"Honestly I'm not sure," confessed Claude. "You see Mr. Griffin knew that old Mr. Gradley was out of town at Hastings, and only came up, very occasionally, to work here in private during the afternoons. He risked it therefore, obtained the key from young Gradley, who is a friend of his, wrote that letter on Gradley's official paper, and arranged for this little re-union, with the sole idea, apparently, of making you suppose that I was not of long descent and therefore might aspire to Vera. I never got to the bottom of what he really meant to say, till he said it."

"It would take a brain as subtle as his own to get to the bottom of Augustus Griffin," answered Mr. Fairbrother. "Human nature is, however, full of these dark and dismal surprises."

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“What he thought *he* was going to get out of it, I can’t say,” continued Claude. “It seems as though he operated entirely on my account, and I may be ungrateful and old-fashioned; but a mother is, after all, a mother.”

“Be sure the more old-fashioned you contrive to keep, the safer you will be, with a temperament like yours,” replied Mrs. Fairbrother. “Better to bore people than lose their respect.”

“If I could only regain yours,” murmured Lord Mountracey, “but that, doubtless, is too much to hope.”

Mrs. Fairbrother considered, and while she did so, her husband spoke.

“You have been tried in the furnace, Claude—if I may call you ‘Claude’—and proved, upon the whole, true metal.”

“Precious metal,” declared Vera.

“No; I won’t go as far as that,” continued her father; “but I am disposed to think your case is not as hopeless as you imagine. Separated from certain malignant influences, to which we need not revert, you may yet justify your existence; but not, I think, in a monastery. I would rather see you fighting the battle of life among the busy ranks of men, and advancing the Housing Question and so forth, than retiring like the snail to its own particular and private

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shell. I shall try to remember only the bright side of you. I shall strive to forget much that had better be forgotten. You're not intrinsically a bad man—eh, Sophia ? ”

“ He's a good man, when he's let alone. He must choose his friends more carefully in future,” she answered.

“ I was going to. I was going to drop a lot of doubtful acquaintance in any case,” replied Claude ; whereupon Mrs. Fairbrother promised to share her husband's kindly feelings and let the past be both forgiven and forgotten.

This dawn of amity aroused Vera's sister, for never had she been known to miss the psychological moment, or mistake it. She spoke now on Vera's account and pointed out an obvious dilemma to her parents.

“ But, papa,” she said, “ if you love Claude for the many excellent things that are worthy of love in him, and if mamma feels the same, then surely Vera may do so too ? Mamma is always telling us to cultivate her friends ; and now Claude's her friend ; and Claude would naturally rather be loved by Vera than mamma.”

“ Youth cleaves to youth,” murmured Claude. “ It may be ill advised, but it always does.”

“ I do love you,” declared Vera firmly. “ I never doubted you in the darkest moments, and

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I shall always love you ; and if you are torn from me, I shall still love the memory of you, and go myself, either into a nunnery, or a decline. It matters little which."

"Restrain yourself, Vera," said her mother, but not severely.

"What do you say, Sophia? There is a certain logical force in Felicity's argument," admitted Mr. Fairbrother.

"I believe he is worthy of Vera, and she is worthy of him," answered his wife. "That, however," she added, "is to pay neither of them any great compliment."

"Don't spoil it, dear Mrs. Fairbrother," begged Claude, while Felicity exerted pressure on her father.

"Be your own kind, generous self, papa!" she cried. "Rise to this great opportunity. You know you've never missed an opportunity in your life. Consent, papa. Vera is all he wants to make him a perfect character. And dear Vera can only live her life once."

"Are you sure of yourselves?" asked Mr. Fairbrother, with a cloud of doubt in his lustrous eyes.

"I am—with Vera," answered Lord Mount-racey.

"And I have never wavered for an instant," vowed Vera.

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"So be it then," replied her father. "I permit your betrothal—I begin to believe that it would be mistaken wisdom to prevent it. I trust Providence, and I think your mother can do so too."

Vera kissed her parents and shed a few happy tears. Then Claude spoke.

"This is far, far beyond anything I have deserved or had the right to hope," he alleged. "I have no words to describe my feelings; but if a lifetime of single-hearted devotion to Mrs. Fairbrother and a manly enthusiasm for my future father-in-law, coupled with a sleepless quest for Norman castles——"

He broke off, too much moved to continue.

"One condition, however, I demand and insist upon," said Mr. Fairbrother, hardening at a painful memory. "Never hold any further communion with the man, Augustus Griffin; never, never let me hear his name upon any of our lips after to-day. You must abandon him utterly, break with him irrevocably, at once and for all time. I am right, Sophia?"

"Emphatically right," she concurred. "I hardly thought that I should live to see a human being without one redeeming feature; but I have; and Augustus Griffin is the man."

At this moment the object of their stern and just resentment returned. He carried a handbag,

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into which had vanished every trace of old Mr. Gradley. He was trim, clean, even self-possessed. An ineffable suggestion of the Hermes of Praxiteles sat, as usual, about his beautifully modelled mouth and curly hair.

XXII

AN ASTOUNDING DEVELOPMENT

“**H**AVEN’T you got a redeeming feature, Gussy?” asked Mr. Fairbrother’s younger daughter, not without a note of deep melancholy in her question.

“One, Felicity,” he answered. “One rare and precious quality I do possess, whatever anybody may say; it would be false modesty to deny it.”

“‘Modesty’!” exclaimed Mrs. Fairbrother bitterly.

“No,” he answered. “I’m not modest myself: I don’t mean that. Only second-raters are modest. A great man knows he’s a great man and doesn’t waste time pretending he isn’t. . . . I see you haven’t forgiven me—any of you.”

“There is no reason why we should,” answered Mr. Fairbrother. “My wife and I have consented to the engagement of our daughter, Vera, with Lord Mountracey—on one condition and one only: that he shall cease to recognise your

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existence from this hour. That will indicate our attitude to you."

"Engaged!" cried the Barrister-at-Law, "Vera and Claude—dear people—dear people! This is glorious—a prodigy—a triumph of right and reason—a ray of pure, dazzling sunshine through the storm!"

"It is," answered Claude; "but unfortunately your part in the incident makes it impossible to—— It is, of course, exceedingly glorious, as you say; but no thanks to you."

"Indeed no," ejaculated Mrs. Fairbrother.

"Therefore," continued her husband, "the sooner you leave us, the better for our peace of mind."

Felicity then spoke calmly, but with shattering logic. She pierced the emotional cloud in which Mr. Fairbrother groped for the moment, and cast the chill light of reason upon the situation which had now developed.

"You said just now that you never jumped on a man when he was down, papa," she argued; "and you will see, if you think, that it is preposterous nonsense to pretend Augustus has nothing to do with Vera's happiness, as Claude so foolishly declares. He had everything to do with it. If it were not for hopelessly bad men, like Augustus, how on earth could we have good men, like Claude?"

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"You see that, don't you, Mr. Fairbrother?" asked Mr. Griffin mildly.

"Gussy was the black thunder-cloud without which we could not have had Claude's gleaming and lustrous rainbow," continued Felicity; but her father checked this decoration of speech.

"Poetry again! Do avoid these similes if you please," he said.

"When I get excited, it will escape," confessed Felicity. "You must see—even dear mamma must see—that without Gussy's horrible wickedness, we should never have realised Claude's extraordinary goodness, and his devotion to his family, and the many other beauties of his character."

"There is no doubt that the bad man occasionally gives the good one his chance; though it is generally the other way," mused Mr. Fairbrother.

Then Augustus spoke.

"We can have no quality without its opposite," he declared. "Contrast is, in fact, the salt of life; and if I have been vinegar to Claude's oil, it was only to prove him pure Lucca. Thus even I am rewarded; and some generous spirits might go so far as to hint that I have sacrificed myself on the altar of friendship, though I make no claim to have done so."

"I should hope not," said Mrs. Fairbrother.

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"At least, Augustus has been beautifully unselfish. We must admit that, whatever we think of him," ventured Felicity; but this was too much for her mother.

"Are we to listen to Mr. Griffin's praises in the mouth of our youngest and least satisfactory child, Josiah?" she asked.

"I've got to speak, because nobody else has the courage, or common sense to do so," answered Felicity with vigour. "Augustus has at least ruined his own career and lost all—not for my sake, but Vera's. Augustus is doomed in any case. It is he, not Claude, who will now go into a monastery."

"I'm afraid we must admit that, old chap," said his fallen friend to the peer.

"I quite see—I quite see; but I can never be 'old chap' to you again, old man," replied Claude sorrowfully.

"Truth," said Mr. Fairbrother, "is evidently your stumbling block, Augustus Griffin. How long have you been in the House of Commons, if I may ask?"

"Six months," replied the member for East Marpleton.

"With your natural predisposition, that would be ample enough," answered the elder.

"Yet, bad though I am," pleaded Augustus, "I know goodness when I see it. I reverence

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veracity in others. I don't want to make this difficult for Claude. It is the case of Henry the Fifth and Falstaff over again, if you will pardon the reference to dramatic poetry. He must drop me. I shall never have such another friend ; but I will give him up. He shall see no more of me. I promise that. Indeed nobody will ever see any more of me."

"This will dash our happiness," sighed Vera.

"That's the worst of doing wrong," said her mother. "The innocent always suffer most. I suggest that Mr. Griffin leaves us."

"I am about to do so," he replied.

"You hinted at a redeeming feature," suggested Mr. Fairbrother, little guessing what terrific events hung upon his kindly effort to let Augustus depart with some shadowy pretence of forgiveness. "What is it?" he continued. "I never mean to rest my eyes on your attractive person again ; but before we part, you may speak if you still desire to do so."

"Anybody can claim a virtue : the difficulty in your case would be to prove it," said Mrs. Fairbrother.

"I am an altruist," asserted Augustus. "I really don't play for my own hand. I'm always out to help my fellow creatures at any personal cost ; and I find that, if you keep your eyes open, a means to assist almost everybody occurs sooner

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or later. If people have the will to seek my aid, I invariably find a way to render it."

"Vain wretch!" said Mrs. Fairbrother harshly.

"No," he replied, "not vanity—merely a curious gift. Take an example."

"Haven't we just had one?" asked Felicity.

"No, that was nothing. Anybody could assist Claude, because he belongs to that class of large-hearted, trustful noblemen, who depend so entirely on the activity of other people for their success. There are many such. But let us fly at higher game and take Mr. Fairbrother himself. Mad though it will doubtless sound, I could do him a magnificent service before I leave this apartment. Here am I—the under dog—down and out—dead to the world—an object of just and universal abomination—and yet even I could bring such brightness into the life of Mr. Fairbrother that it would add ten years to his existence."

"As you've taken off ten years, that's the least you could do," retorted the engineer's wife.

"But this is merely nonsense, spoken to prolong your desired departure, Mr. Griffin," she added.

"The mouse can help the lion perhaps, papa," ventured Felicity.

"He can; and if the lion will only give him five minutes, he will," promised Augustus brightly and confidently.

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"It ill becomes you to ask for favours," said Mrs. Fairbrother.

"I'm not," he answered; "I'm burning to confer one. I have lost everything; I am about to go unfriended into an unfriendly world; but before I go, I am ready, able and willing to add ten years to the invaluable life of Mr. Fairbrother. Surely—surely that's good enough?"

"You shall never serve me in any capacity whatsoever, Mr. Griffin," declared the older man inexorably.

"It sounds fabulous but, for once, is the solemn truth," continued Augustus. "Five minutes is not much to give in exchange for ten years. *Hors de combat* as I am, you cannot deny me this last privilege. It is contrary to your character, Mr. Fairbrother."

"You'd never forgive yourself if you refused, papa," said Felicity.

"I too plead for him, papa," added Vera. "He has seen and known better days. There is always a pathos about those who have known better days, even if they didn't deserve to."

"I also venture on a word," murmured Claude. "There was much to admire about Augustus in the old, innocent years, before he took silk."

"Took silk did he?" asked Mrs. Fairbrother, her suspicions aroused anew. "Where from? And, what is more important, who for?"

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"Again I yield," said Mr. Fairbrother patiently. "I will listen to the man. Leave us for five minutes; and take the Bronze, Sophia, please."

"Am I to go?" she asked. "Think twice before you suggest that. You're not afraid?"

"Emphatically no," he replied. "Mr. Griffin is not one to fear."

"We will all go down into the court for five minutes," suggested Claude. "A breath of pure Lincoln's Inn air——"

"Make it ten minutes if possible," urged Augustus under his breath to his betrothed.

"You can shout through the window, Josiah, if anything happens you don't like," said Mrs. Fairbrother.

"If he shouts, it will be with joy," declared Augustus.

And then he found himself alone with the father of Felicity.

XXIII

"THE DIGNITY OF TOIL"

"**B**E brief, please," said Mr. Fairbrother, looking at his watch and showing no great interest in what was to follow.

"Within reason, yes," answered Augustus.

"Now, my very dear sir, I want you to answer me a few vital questions."

"I am not here to answer questions—vital or otherwise," replied the elder. But he soon found himself dealing with a new and strange Augustus.

Mr. Griffin, forgetting that he did not wear his professional gown, had given his coat a hitch and adopted the pose of one about to cross-examine a witness. He set his foot on a chair and leant over Mr. Fairbrother in a manner almost minatory.

"You will, I think, find that you are," he answered. "Nor must you feel any reluctance to doing so. During your early life you were, I believe, employed in assisting to make those disgusting tunnels on the South Eastern Railway?"

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“ I was,” answered Mr. Fairbrother. “ What of it ? ”

“ But your great intellect, even as a youth, soared to higher problems than boring tunnels ? ”

“ It did.”

“ You doubtless saw that your fellow labourers failed to recognise the significance and importance of work and did not in the least realise the nobility of their exploits ? ”

“ True,” answered Mr. Fairbrother, mildly interested. “ I perceived that what brutalised us and kept us back, like dumb, driven cattle, without ambition or organisation, was ignorance. The navvies only thought of their wages. But it is a sign of something utterly rotten in the social scheme if a man only thinks of his wages. That is what is happening at this moment. So absorbed is the proletariat in its wages that it overlooks the fundamental truism that wages entail work. If many of us worked eighteen hours a day instead of eight, we could not earn the wages we are getting now, because we are neither mentally nor physically endowed to earn them. It used to be said that a thing was only worth what it would fetch ; but now things, labour included, fetch more than they ever can be worth—hence our tears. But my companions of old did not understand their real greatness and power, or the nobility of their exploits, as you say. They failed to

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appreciate their own possibilities. I wanted to lift them, help them to see what was their due, as human beings, and make them proud of themselves and glad that they were born, instead of, as in many cases, sorry."

"Just so," answered Augustus. "You alone of that stalwart gang appreciated the dignity of toil?"

A strange, almost suspicious expression crossed the engineer's face. But it passed as swiftly as it came.

"That is so," he admitted. "The working classes had not learned, that to sell your labour is not to sell yourself. The working day is but a part of every twenty-four hours. It was my youthful wish to make my colleagues see that the major portion of their time belonged to themselves. That they have now grasped clearly enough—on the whole too clearly. They show a desire to claim twenty hours out of the twenty-four. But the pendulum will swing again."

"The fish-plate had not then dawned upon your ingenious mind?" asked Augustus.

"It had not."

"But you occupied your own leisure with kindly thoughts and advanced problems for the betterment of the workers? You strove to rouse them?"

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“I strove and failed,” admitted Mr. Fairbrother. “I was, of course, unequipped for my task—an ignorant, hot-headed boy. I could not see that while wages persisted at the shameful rate of those days, my fellow workers had no room in their thick heads for any other problems.”

“You, however, cherished your own ideals. You still imagined that Labour really held the intellectual world in the hollow of its hand? You read books, attended Mechanics’ Institutes and advocated socialistic theories?”

“I suffered from the ordinary illusions of sanguine youth,” replied Mr. Fairbrother uneasily.

“Your dreams were those of a poet, dear sir,” declared Augustus blandly; but the other frowned and his eyes flashed.

“I object to the word and I resent the implication,” he answered warmly. “The foolish, foggy ideas of a young and very ignorant boy——”

“The ideas took shape, however,” persisted Mr. Griffin. “You cannot deny that.”

“How could they? What do you mean?” asked the elder, his face a prey to lively anxiety, if not actual alarm.

“I will not keep you in suspense,” continued Augustus. “I mean the use to which you put your savings in the year 1872. I mean a poisonous, anarchic, little volume of exceedingly bad poetry,

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bound in black and having a red cap of Liberty on the outside. I mean 'The Dignity of Toil,' by Josiah Fairbrother ! ”

Before this terrific assault, it is not too much to say that the unfortunate engineer crumpled both in mind and body. His limbs not only gave beneath him, but appeared actually to shrink. He crouched contracted, almost palsied, in his chair, as though he had been stricken by lightning ; while a glazed look of horror dimmed his expressive eyes and cold perspiration sprang to his forehead.

“ Discovered ! ” he said, in a deep sigh, as bitter as the east wind through a winter forest.

“ Be calm,” urged Augustus. “ Dry the beads upon your brow, Mr. Fairbrother. We are but at the beginning of our inquiry. It is idle to deny these facts, for the book still exists—an incitement to open rebellion—a glorification of syndicalism in its most unblushing form—the germ of that Bolshevism—that last and most terrible tyranny—threatening our body politic at the present day.”

“ The book does not exist,” answered Mr. Fairbrother faintly, his broken voice indicating the emotion under which he laboured.

“ You know better, dear sir,” replied the lawyer firmly yet not unkindly. “ It does exist ; and if I so willed, I could republish it to-morrow—aye, and flood the market with it. I could cast ‘ The

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Dignity of Toil’ on the Board-room table of every iron and steel company in the City ; I could sow it broadcast among the masses and see it reviewed with enthusiasm by not a few journals, the names of which are familiar to us both.”

Mr. Fairbrother girt himself to battle. He leapt to his feet and squared up to the Member of Parliament.

“ You lie ! ” he cried. “ You lie, Augustus Griffin. It is out of print ! ”

“ Forgive me, no. Why be ashamed of it ? It is illiterate, unseemly and utterly hopeless from any standard of art, or economics. That, of course, we grant ; but so is much that men print and applaud to-day. It would easily hold its own and, coming from you, win an immense notoriety.”

“ Are you a man or a demon ? But I defy you, whichever you are,” answered Mr. Fairbrother wildly. “ Listen, wretch ! How you know these facts I have yet to learn ; but, since you have discovered them, hear more. Five hundred copies of my blazing indiscretion were printed—needless to say at my own expense ; and it has been the bitter and degrading work of a lifetime to trace them down, secure them and destroy them. The labour was stupendous, the cost gigantic. For thirty years skilled bibliophiles did my will, until four hundred and ninety-nine volumes were

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recovered and committed to the flames by my own hand."

"What of the five hundredth?"

"That is beyond your reach and alas! mine. It is, in fact, beyond human reach. It lies in the British Museum Library, and nothing I can do will tempt the authorities to part from it. A special Act of Parliament would be needed and I have striven in vain to secure one."

"Sit down," begged Augustus. "Be seated, Mr. Fairbrother. Believe me, I share your most reasonable emotion. There are times when the resources of civilisation are powerless to right our wrongs; when the very laws we make to save ourselves from ourselves, defeat their own object and inflict iniquitous injustice. This is one of them. Here is a piece of heartless red tape standing between a member of the community—an important member—and his obvious rights—the work of his brain—as much his property as his fish-plate. You, and you alone, ought to have that book."

A measure of relief passed over the listener's countenance. He mopped his forehead and uttered a heavy sigh.

"You feel I ought?" he asked.

"Intensely—indignantly—I may say passionately," replied Augustus. His voice indeed rang with conviction.

“*THE DIGNITY OF TOIL*”

“And how came you to learn of this heart-rending secret and tragedy?” inquired Mr. Fairbrother. “I cannot conceive that any member of my family would have revealed my sacred and mortal wound.”

“Absolve each and all of them,” implored the Barrister. “I was going to say ‘chance;’ but such things do not happen by chance. Pursuing recent studies among the minor mid-Victorian poets, of whom more existed than is generally supposed, I was confronted with ‘The Dignity of Toil.’ I saw in an instant, from what your younger daughter had told me, that it did not represent your present mature convictions; and when you and I met, at Tunbridge Wells, I was more than ever convinced that the book ought not to exist. I became annoyed. I could not get the volume out of my head. I felt that respect for an eminent and renowned personality should long ago have suppressed the production and not left it at the mercy of any unlettered person with a ticket for the B.M. Reading Room. I said to myself, ‘This leaves Mr. Fairbrother, as it were, naked to the world in his most tender and only vulnerable place.’”

“I have writhed under that thought for nearly half a century,” answered his hearer in deepest gloom.

“I guessed as much,” declared Augustus. “I

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resented the blind, idiotic, inhuman machinery that created this scandal. I scorned the imbecility of regulations that inflict a false immortality upon the drivel of youth. 'The Spirit of Liberty rose in me and tempted me to break the law.'

"Impossible, Mr. Griffin," sighed the melancholy sufferer.

"Nothing is impossible with right upon your side," answered the younger. "At any rate, I felt so. Something prompted—something urged. I had no peace. I was driven by my unconquerable altruism. Only within the last few hours this impulse became so strong that I returned to the British Museum, saw the book again, and moved by an inspiration, abstracted 'The Dignity of Toil' from under the very nose of its insensate custodians, then hastened fearlessly away!"

Mr. Fairbrother was deeply moved.

"Remarkable man! You stole it?" he exclaimed in a voice not devoid of admiration.

"The word is far too strong," replied Augustus. "It was no theft, but an act of reparation and justice."

"Heroic justice without a doubt," admitted the elder.

"For the honour of the community I did it; but of course the responsibility and peril are mine alone. They may, indeed, be upon my track

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at this moment,” proceeded Augustus, “for the deed was done but recently. I care not for them, however. I care nothing for anything that man can do, when I think of Mrs. Fairbrother’s joy, Vera’s enthusiastic delight, Felicity’s happiness and, above all, your own relief and thankfulness.”

“Where is the accursed book now?” asked Mr. Fairbrother with a spasm of doubt. “In your chambers, I suppose?”

“No—in my pocket,” answered Augustus.

“Do not delude me,” implored the author, in a voice that again trembled. “Do not play with me at such a supreme moment. Don’t let me awaken and find this amazing statement a dream. It is well known that we often dream the things we wish to happen most. Hence, doubtless, the familiar adage that dreams never come true.”

For reply Augustus plunged his hand into the pocket of his coat and produced a little, dingy and time-worn work in a black cover, with the red, republican cap upon its face.

“Take it—touch it—turn over the leaves, dear Mr. Fairbrother!” he answered with an expression of extreme benignity. “The book is real enough; and it is yours.”

Mr. Fairbrother extended trembling hands and a moment’s scrutiny convinced him that indeed he held the last existing copy of his early error.

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"This is the happiest moment of my life!" said Augustus, as though he meant it.

"And of mine—and of mine!" answered Mr. Fairbrother solemnly. "Yes—yes—the stamp of the British Museum," he added. "I have detested that institution for four decades."

Then the benevolent heart of this good man spoke.

"What can I do? How is it possible ever to repay this astounding service?" he asked, intense gratitude bubbling in his voice.

"Don't wound me, dear friend," replied Augustus. "Don't make me suffer more than this afternoon has already made me suffer. I have done much wrong for Claude; I have done technical wrong for you; but, dammy, I won't do wrong for myself! This is not a bargain; it is an act of contrition—an expiation, if you will—a piacular sacrifice on the altar of your family. In any case my act belongs to an order of achievement entirely above recompense. And yet, no. You ask my reward? Your flashing eyes, your contented expression, the peace upon your forehead—these are my reward!"

At this somewhat affecting moment, and while the right hand of Augustus was closely held in the grateful grip of Mr. Fairbrother, the electric bell rang and both men returned at once into the domain of reality.

“*THE DIGNITY OF TOIL*”

“They have come back,” said Mr. Griffin.
“I will admit them.”

“Not a word to Claude!” urged Mr. Fairbrother. “He need never know.”

“Not a syllable to a soul,” replied Augustus.

“You must try to forget what you have done,” begged the elder, and Augustus promised.

“It is exceedingly difficult to forget our own good deeds,” he answered; “but I will try.”

Then he hastened to answer the bell, while Mr. Fairbrother fingered “*The Dignity of Toil*” and regarded it with agitation and hatred. But the anger passed. He put the book in his pocket, wiped his glasses, and at the approach of his family appeared in a cheerful and even exalted mood.

XXIV

VICTORY

SUCH, indeed, was her husband's elevation of mind, that when Mrs. Fairbrother, accompanied by her daughters and Lord Mountracey, stood again before him, she thought and feared for a fleeting moment that he had taken leave of his senses. For Mr. Fairbrother openly and noisily quoted poetry.

" 'Now is the winter of our discontent made glorious summer by this,'—rare Augustus!" he declaimed with a smiling countenance, and his wife and Vera stood almost stricken into stone. Felicity also indicated more astonishment than she felt, while Claude, jumping to a wrong conclusion, turned fiercely on his former friend.

"If you have unhinged Mr. Fairbrother's mind, you will answer to me in the only way that a gentleman can!" he cried.

"Are you all right, Josiah? What's the matter? Be calm, my dear," urged Mrs. Fairbrother, herself far from calm. But his answer partially relieved her.

VICTORY

"Yes, yes," said Mr. Fairbrother, "all is right—all is exceedingly right—as right as nine-pence in fact!"

He folded his long arms over his chest, where "The Dignity of Toil" lay hidden, and beamed upon them.

"The Bronze, Sophia," he said, and in another moment the Venus of Naxos was also concealed within his breast.

"Your husband has been more than patient with me, Mrs. Fairbrother," declared Claude in gentle accents, with his eyes upon Felicity's father.

"Patience is his great failing. Patience gives people like you their opportunity," retorted Mrs. Fairbrother; but Felicity drew her attention to a physiological fact.

"He's kept his word anyway," she said. "Papa really is looking ten years younger."

"As radiant as a youth!" declared Vera.

"Positively sparkling!" ventured Augustus.

"Isn't he, dear Mrs. Fairbrother?"

Josiah's wife regarded her spouse suspiciously.

"He certainly does look more cheerful than I expected to find him," she admitted in somewhat grudging accents.

"I have been much moved," acknowledged Mr. Fairbrother, and his wife expressed incredulity.

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"You're not going to tell me that the man's got round you again?" she asked; while Felicity spoke to Augustus.

"Even you seem a little more chirpy," she said.

"To bring happiness to others always makes me chirpy," he answered, and then Mr. Fairbrother spoke, though vaguely of set purpose.

"Affecting and beautiful things have been displayed before my eyes, Sophia," he began.

"What's he been acting now—Sidney Carton?" inquired Mrs. Fairbrother.

"He has not been acting. I have had such a glimpse of human nature as makes me feel very humble," replied the engineer. "Mr. Griffin said that we didn't understand him. It may have been to some extent his own fault; but he was right—we didn't."

"Who wants to?" asked Mrs. Fairbrother.

"I find what Tennyson wrote is true," continued her husband. "You may, or may not like Tennyson; but it is a fact that men still do occasionally rise on stepping-stones of their dead selves to higher things. Mr. Griffin has done so."

"In ten minutes?" asked Mrs. Fairbrother.

"No," replied Augustus, "I put little trust in sudden reformations. Mine dates back several hours. You will doubtless hear the particulars

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in due course. It suffices that I am forgiven. There's always a smart about being forgiven, of course; but that will be part of my punishment."

"Talk not of punishment," cried Mr. Fairbrother. "Dear Augustus"—if I may call him 'dear Augustus'—"has proved himself resolute, devoted, trustworthy and loyal to the death!"

His wife fixed her eyes upon Mr. Griffin, as though she would read his very soul.

"'Loyal!'" she said; "'Dear Augustus!'"

"Loyal to me," explained Josiah earnestly. "He has a conscience, a sense of justice and a fidelity to principle, that we may well envy him. He has scorned danger, broken infamous official regulations, taken the law into his own, strong hands and damned the consequences—all for me."

"Where's your halo, old man?" asked Lord Mountracey, but the Member of Parliament snubbed him.

"Peace, Claude," he answered. "This is no time for buffoonery."

"I saw all these good points in Augustus," declared Felicity. "I felt the possibilities in him, papa. From the first I felt them."

"You did," admitted Augustus. "It is often the privilege of a good woman, and sometimes

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the delight of a bad one, to show us our possibilities."

"If Mr. Fairbrother can pardon Augustus so completely, then I venture to hope I may be permitted to do so," suggested Claude.

"'Pardon him!' It is not for you to pardon him," retorted his future father-in-law. "It becomes you, and the rest of us, to reverence his name and seek to profit by his example. He is above applause or reward."

"Are we at Maskelyne and Cooke's?" asked Mrs. Fairbrother. Her emotion, it will be observed, took the shape of nothing but questions, which nobody answered. But now her husband drew her aside and informed her secretly of the prodigious truth. Meantime Vera addressed the hero of the incident.

"Didn't you even ask for a reward, Gussy?" she inquired.

"I did not, Vera," he answered sadly; "because the only reward that I could accept for my little services has been for ever denied me. I refer, of course, to your sister."

A loud exclamation from Mrs. Fairbrother pealed through the apartment.

"Man alive! D'you mean it?" she almost screamed.

Mr. Fairbrother's answer was for her ear alone.

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"In my pocket at this moment. The B.M. copy!" he whispered.

Then Mrs. Fairbrother—a woman of impulse always—turned to Mr. Griffin.

"Come here, Augustus," she said, and kissed him on both cheeks with a prolonged and hearty salutation. "If an old woman's blessing is any earthly, or heavenly, use to you, it's yours," she added affectionately and with moist eyes.

"Of the greatest possible use to me," he replied. "There is indeed only one thing I should have valued more."

"Is it beyond my power?" ventured Felicity.

"Nothing is beyond your power," he answered.

"You are the wonder, the paragon, not I. Your gentle inspiration, your high ideals have lifted me to this slight eminence. What I have done would never have been done but for your unconscious influence. You, in fact, are the masterpiece—not I. I'm quite an everyday sort of man really."

"You're not," said Mrs. Fairbrother. "You're unique. You're a fiery phoenix."

"Augustus," explained Mr. Fairbrother, "while not himself a poet, yet may well be a source of poetry in others. Just as many of the denizens of the primeval wild have produced notable poetic lines, though themselves quite unaware of their beauty, or dignity, as the case

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may be. One may, for example, liken Augustus to Blake's 'Tyger burning bright.' Yes, we can all speak poetically now. Nay, those of my family who desire to do so may write poetry. The embargo is lifted."

"We certainly have material for an epic," said Vera.

"If Felicity still feels——" began Augustus ; but Mrs. Fairbrother cut him short.

"Take her—she's yours !" said the mother of Felicity.

"And may she sufficiently value the privilege of being yours," added Mr. Fairbrother.

At this moment a violent and prolonged ringing of the office bell challenged their attention.

They stared questioningly at each other, and Lord Mountracey spoke :

"It's old Gradley !" he said.

Augustus turned to Mr. Fairbrother.

"They may have run me down," he whispered ; "if so, I shall deny everything."

"Everything ! Everything," answered the elder, crossing his arms over the concealed volume.

The bell rang again—the prolonged effort of an angry man.

"I will go," said Claude. "I should like you all to see that I can be fearless and resolute too."

VICTORY

Old Gradley oughtn't to have come to his office to-day, and I shall tell him so. ”

He went without a tremor and the bell rang petulantly on.

THE CURTAIN FALLS

“**B**E calm,” begged the Barrister. “I learned from the younger Mr. Gradley that his father occasionally visited the office about this hour, but that the chances of his doing so were remote. If it is old Gradley, I shall be equal to the occasion ; and if it is somebody else, as I fear, I shall still strive to be equal to the occasion.”

“ ‘ Stone walls do not a prison make, nor iron bars a cage,’ ” quoted Mr. Fairbrother.

“ As a matter of fact, it can’t be Mr. Gradley,” said the clear-minded Felicity ; “ for if it were, he would enter with his private key, knowing, or supposing, his office to be empty.”

But at this moment Claude returned. He was at his case. Indeed he appeared to be gratified. A remarkable figure followed him—an elderly, haggard man in black with a black tie. He wore a bowler hat and carried a heavy, but old-fashioned, Arabian pistol in either hand.

It was Nupkins.

THE CURTAIN FALLS

"You!" cried the family of Fairbrother with one voice.

"Yes," he replied grimly. "It's me; and thank God I ain't too late. I couldn't rest when you'd all gone, and I got the address off the envelope you put in the waste-paper basket last night, and swore I'd be here. I knew you was putting your heads into a den of lions, and I said, 'if an honest man can save 'em, I'll do it!'"

"Faithful fellow! faithful fellow!" answered Mr. Fairbrother.

"This is quite beautiful of you, Nupkins," declared Felicity.

"You never know all there is in anybody," asserted her mother.

"If you want to escape, I'll bar the way," continued the butler, pointing his pistols one at Claude, the other at Augustus. "They shall only get you over my dead corpse."

"Cinematographic to the last, old friend," said Claude genially. "But don't do that. All is well."

"Where's the Bronze?" demanded Nupkins, and his master explained.

"Disarm him, Felicity," urged Vera. "He will do anything for you."

But Nupkins had already lowered the lethal weapons.

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"They ain't loaded," he said. "I only meant to terrify 'em."

"You must come to tea with us," declared Mrs. Fairbrother. "You have suffered, dear Nupkins. I can see it in your face."

"I only wanted to do my duty," answered the devoted servitor.

"We've all been doing our duty all day, Nupkins," declared Augustus. "And may you find yourself as nobly rewarded as Lord Mount-racey and I have been."

"Don't feel another pang, Nupkins," begged Vera. "We shall enjoy a cup of tea. It has been a thirsty afternoon."

Nupkins bowed. Then he brought a massive envelope from his pocket.

"This came, and I brought it along, because I thought it might have to do with the Bronze," he explained, handing the missive to his master. "One of them 'On His Majesty's Service' affairs—no stamps," he continued. "They've always given me the creeps, ever since I had to pay on what they call my 'unearned income'—God forgive them."

"Look at it, Josiah—perhaps it's the big contract through," said Mrs. Fairbrother.

But her husband hesitated.

"I don't think I can stand any more good fortune to-day," he said.

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Nevertheless he opened the letter, and while he read, Augustus, explaining that it would be well to leave everything as they had found it, set about tidying old Mr. Gradley's office. Vera, Felicity and Claude assisted him. They were just about to draw down the blind when the engineer spoke to his wife.

"Sophia, this is too much!" he said.

"Lost it?" she asked. "Never mind. Who's got it?"

"It doesn't concern the contract," he answered.

"It may interest you all. Read it aloud, Vera."

Vera, taking the letter, written on a class of hand-made paper that no self-respecting Department ought to use in these hard times, rehearsed the document aloud.

Thus she read:—

"To Josiah Fairbrother Esq., J.P.

'SIR,

'His Majesty's Government has long been deeply impressed by your patriotic guardianship of historic monuments and the care and judgment displayed in your restorations, when necessary, of the Nation's famous Norman ruins. Taken in connection with your other far-reaching and discriminate philanthropic activities, His Majesty is desirous to adequately acknowledge such valuable and long sustained

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services and it will give him personal pleasure——’

“ ‘Personal pleasure!’ Then we can forgive the split infinitive,” said Felicity.

“ ‘Personal pleasure,’ ” continued Vera, “ ‘to forego the usual preliminary step and confer upon you a Barony of the United Kingdom.’ ”

‘ I have the honour to be,
‘ Faithfully yours——’ ”

“ Somebody who can’t write his name apparently—at any rate I can’t read it,” concluded Vera.

It was Nupkins who broke the silence.

“ At last ! ” he said.

“ And none too soon,” added his mistress.

“ This—to me ! ” ejaculated Mr. Fairbrother.

“ Are not my principles known ? ”

“ Perhaps not so widely as mamma’s,” suggested Felicity.

“ Principles change ; human nature doesn’t,” declared Mrs. Fairbrother.

“ That is one of the few things every Government understands,” said Augustus.

Felicity felt that it was a case of “ now or never.” It seemed improbable that Mr. Fairbrother would again find himself in such a melting mood.

THE CURTAIN FALLS

"You see, papa, if you were inside, you could attack the institution personally. To undermine it from within would be far more effective than merely to hate it from without."

"Why hate it, when you consider, Claude?" asked Vera.

"I never imagined the faintest possibility of this happening," said Mr. Fairbrother, honestly enough.

"I always did," answered his wife; "and, under some circumstances, you might have declined, Josiah, and I should have supported you, but not in these. You cannot bandy opinions with your Sovereign, my dear. His 'personal pleasure'—surely?"

"You would argue that his personal pleasure is more important than mine?" asked Mr. Fairbrother respectfully. "What say you, Nupkins?" he added.

"I'm ready," answered the indomitable retainer.

"And when you and Claude are both in, dearest papa, you will be able to give your ever faithful Gussy a helping hand too," said Felicity gaily.

Her mother spoke.

"Have no fear for Augustus," she replied, with the solemnity of a prophetess. "Augustus will get exactly where he wants to, and when he wants to, without anybody's help."

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“ Dear Mrs. Fairbrother ! ” replied the young man, kissing her hand.

Then they drew down the white blind, left Lincoln’s Inn and went their way to a place of refreshment.

Felicity rather wanted to leave the pistols—to bewilder old Mr. Gradley on his return ; but there were sufficient reasons for not doing so, and Nupkins contrived to secrete the weapons about his person.

“ Let nobody be one penny the worse for the astounding events of this afternoon,” said Mr. Fairbrother.

THE END









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